

Plan B: Toward a New Belongingness

A Professional Project

presented to

the Faculty of

Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Ministry

by

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This professional project completed by

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has been presented to and accepted by the  
faculty of Claremont School of Theology in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

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## **Abstract**

The desired outcome of the Plan B Project is to better understand constructive environments that nurture faith for those whom no longer feel at home in their evangelical tradition.

As observed in the research of Phyllis Tickle, the church is experiencing a radical transformation, a “great emergence” (Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, 2008). As with any significant societal shift, people, institutions and traditions adjust differently, if at all. Consequently, people may view the world and spirituality through an emerging way, while at the same time, confined within a tradition or institution that resists or even rejects the basis of the emergence (even seeing it as the enemy). There are a growing number of people who have historically self-identified as ‘evangelical’ who can no longer pretend that the theological assumptions of evangelicalism fit their present understanding of the world.

This project explores the potentiality of an online space for refuge, relationship and reflection for those whose faith is transitioning, beyond evangelicalism. As more and more people are isolated by their churches for asking questions and raising doubts about evangelicalism’s coherence, this project is seeking to create space where those in faith-transition can connect with like-minded people and safely explore alternative approaches to faith.

## Acknowledgments

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And finally, my sincere gratitude to the men and women who participated in The Experience. You inspire me beyond words. Your courage, inquisitiveness and tenacity are the things of reformation! Don't stop doing what you're doing! Thank you for being in this with me.

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## Chapter One: Research Design

### Problem

The problem addressed in the following project is the experience of isolation felt by an increasing number of people who are discovering that evangelicalism no longer possesses the theological coherence for their envisioned future.

### Importance of the Problem

As observed in the research of Phyllis Tickle, the western church is amid a radical transformation, a “great emergence.”<sup>1</sup> As with any significant societal shift, people, institutions and traditions adjust differently, if at all. Consequently, people who may view the world and spirituality through an emerging way, often feel trapped in a tradition or institution that resists or even rejects the basis of the emergence. Having my ministerial credentials from a conservative evangelical tradition, I witnessed first-hand, the strong institutional resistance to any challenge of traditional dogma. Yet for a growing number of people who have been formed through evangelicalism, there is an increasing correspondence and coherence gap with the tradition. The evangelical faith many were taught, fails to reflect to the world they experience. Consequently, more evangelicals are feeling isolated from their tradition and searching for a Christianity (and a community) which has greater coherence.

The recent sociological phenomenon of evangelicals disassociating from their tradition is well documented. For example, according to an August 2016 study by the Public Policy Research Institute (PPRI), 39% of adults aged 18–29 self-identify as religiously unaffiliated. This is nearly four times higher than the same demographic in 1986 where only 10% identified

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 1.

as religiously unaffiliated. With 17.8% of the American population identifying as White Evangelical Protestants, the study also showed a staggering 6% of Americans were leaving White Evangelical Protestantism. The largest religious affiliation in America has become those who are religiously unaffiliated, making up 24.8% of the total population. As demonstrated in the PPRI study, 60% of respondents were leaving their religious affiliation because “they stopped believing in the religion’s teaching.”<sup>2</sup> This will be a foundational observation for understanding Plan B.

The Pew Research Center reveals the same trend in their ground breaking 2012 study. Although their numbers vary slightly from the PPRI study, they are consistent. The Pew Research Center shows that in 2007, 21% of Americans identified as White Evangelical Protestants. In just five years, that number dropped to 19%. As evangelicalism is experiencing a decline, The Pew Research Center confirms that it is the religiously unaffiliated (“the Nones”), who continue to grow. In just five years, the number of religiously unaffiliated American adults has risen from 15% of the population to 20%. Strikingly, 68% of the Nones maintain a belief in God.<sup>3</sup> The study suggests, people are walking away from their religious tradition/affiliation, yet are not walking away from God. The tradition they once identified with, is no longer desirable.

This exodus from religious affiliation is not just an American phenomenon, it is demonstrably real north of the border, in Canada. According to Statistics Canada, between 1985 and 2004, the religiously unaffiliated between the ages of 15–29 grew from 16% of the demographic to 30%. Lest one thinks this is just a phenomenon amongst younger Canadians, the

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<sup>2</sup> Betsy Cooper et al., “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” Public Religion Research Institute, August 22, 2016, accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.prri.org/research/prri-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion>.

<sup>3</sup> “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012, accessed March 21, 2017, [http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/#\\_ftnref6](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/#_ftnref6).

same 2004 census data reveals that between 1985 and 2004 the religiously unaffiliated over the age of 60 doubled from 4% of the demographic to 8%.<sup>4</sup> Canadians are leaving their religious tradition just as quickly as their American neighbors.<sup>5</sup>

Although the statistics quantify the extent of the phenomenon, the numbers provide only limited insight into why there is such an exodus away from religious affiliation (including evangelicalism) and the impact the leaving has on those who disassociate. This project is concerned with the spiritual, emotional, social and psychological implications for those whom feel they can no longer affiliate with their evangelical tradition.

This is deeply personal for me; having worked as an ordained minister within the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists of Canada<sup>6</sup> for 15 years, I have witnessed a shifting faith-posture in many committed followers of Christ. Within the church I led, there emerged a pronounced and undeniable divide amidst the congregation. On one end of the spectrum, there were those committed to classical doctrines of penal substitutionary atonement, homosexuality being sin, hell as eternal conscious torment, and an inerrant biblical literalism. Simultaneously, there was a growing number of men, women and youth for whom such doctrines were not only intellectually incongruent but morally reprehensible.

My goal as a pastor/leader was to get these two groups to dialogue. However, before any helpful conversation began, many of those who self-identified with the classical doctrines, dismissed those seeking to articulate and engage the faith from a more inclusive and expansive posture. The dialogue quickly broke down as many left the church, insisting that any other way

<sup>4</sup> “Young Adults Are Most Likely to Have No Religious Affiliation,” Statistics Canada, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2006001/c-g/4097582-eng.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Having spent my entire pastoral career in the Canadian context and drawing so many Canadian participants into this project, it is essential to note the similarity between the Canadian and American trends.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fellowship.ca>.

of viewing the faith could not be given credence. The messaging from many of the church's stake holders was clear, if you're not 'our kind of Christian' you don't belong. Such posturing seems to be a desperate attempt to hold onto a fear based, violence dependent, coercive Christianity. In the end, those committed to the classical doctrines felt compelled to leave and join other churches that shared their consensus of the faith.

Meanwhile, those seeking a Christianity defined by inclusion, mercy, the rejection of all divine violence and a nuanced reading of Scripture, increasingly felt that their only option was to deny their concerns to remain within the group, or give up on Christian community (the group) to retain their convictions. These are the people that became the statistical unaffiliated.

This project is intended to write/create/design for the latter group of people; the people whose faith no longer fits the classical confines of established evangelicalism. I would like to provide a pastoral context for those experiencing a 'faith-transition' beyond evangelicalism. A space where one can be assured that all critiques and concerns are valid. 'Faith-transitioners' need to know there are others who share their theological vision for transformation. Consequently, this will be a project seeking to design an online space of emotional refuge, covenant relationship and theological reflection.

I have always been impressed with the ethos of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is a place where people are encouraged to admit who they really are. Those who have the courage to articulate their true reality are invited to participate in a shared process, in which one moves toward a healthier expression of themselves. I imagine such an environment for those who realize they no longer fit the context of evangelicalism. A context that allows them to find a fresh expression of generous faith and community.

## Research Design

To engage the above problem, I will design an online experience for those who feel they no longer fit their evangelical context for reasons of theological coherence. The purpose of ‘The Experience’<sup>7</sup> will be to: 1) provide an emotional *refuge* where participants are safe to express their doubts, fears, thoughts and feelings as they determine appropriate 2) foster spiritual *relationship* in which participants engage with fellow sojourners, connecting to a virtual community that shares their experience of transition 3) engage in spiritual *reflection* in such a way that participants feel validated and equipped in a more progressive expression of the Christian faith.

How this project will seek to achieve the stated objectives:

- 1) Identify Participants: This project will only be successful if there is an engaged group of participants who will find value in an online group of refuge, relationship and reflection.
  - a) To identify participants, I will use my network of friends/colleagues/social media contacts/former congregants who have expressed a felt incoherence with their evangelical tradition.
  - b) Create a web-based questionnaire that seeks to understand where the incoherence with evangelicalism, comes from.
- 2) Create an online forum for interaction
  - a) Secure a private Facebook page where videos can be posted and where only participants can gain access to the content and contribute to the discussion
  - b) Generate a survey/questionnaire/feedback mechanism on the site where people can share their stories and ‘angst’ about their journey/formation.

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<sup>7</sup> The online group for participants will be referred to as ‘The Experience’ for the purposes of the Plan B project. See Chapter One, *Definition of Terms*.

- 3) Facilitate an online community for participants to belong
  - a) Invite participant to register for a five-week experience, facilitated and designed to foster a space of emotional *refuge*, safe *relationship*, and spiritual *reflection*.
  - b) Participants will walk through a process of assurance that their doubts and fears are valid, that they are not alone in experiencing an incoherence with evangelicalism and that there is a theologically rich way to reframe and articulate a generous and inclusive expression of Christianity.
  - c) Write a pastoral curriculum for these participants that is consistent with the data collected from 1b.
- 4) Assess the impact of this online Facebook forum, seeking to understand how it did or did not create a place of refuge, initiate relationship & provide helpful spiritual reflection for the participants.
- 5) Explore the implications of what is learned from The Experience for ministry, faith-formation, social justice initiatives and other relevant areas of Christian formation and practice.

#### Objective

In response to the growing number of Christians who have become disillusioned with evangelicalism, this project seeks to design and implement a 5-week, online ‘recovery and reframing’ forum, by which participants will find refuge, relationship and space for theological reflection.

*The desired outcome of the Plan B Project is to better understand constructive environments that nurture faith for those whom no longer feel at home in their evangelical tradition.*

## Hypothesis

Embarking on The Experience, I hypothesize that I will observe the following four phenomena:

- 1) Participants instinctively know there is an incongruence between evangelical doctrine and what they experience in world. Naming the places of incongruence will bring a sense of freedom for participants.
- 2) Participants are looking to live a faith expression that has coherence with what they experience in the world. There will be a greater urgency amongst participants to leave their evangelical church if such a coherent faith is articulated. When given theological language and data that affirms their inclinations and contradicts their evangelical tradition, participants will be more likely to move away from evangelical groups.
- 3) The crisis of faith for participants is primarily theological in nature. They are looking for theological formation to ease their theological and cognitive dissonance.
- 4) Participants will discover a new theological consensus.

## Scope and Limitations

People inevitably leave churches and traditions for a variety of reasons. I will not be able to provide support for every experience and need. Therefore, the primary focus of The Experience and the Plan B project, will be to engage participants who have experienced or are experiencing a correspondence and/or coherence break with evangelical Christianity (a faith-transition).

## Definition of Terms

### *Evangelical / Evangelicalism*

The most allusive reoccurring term(s) in Plan B is ‘evangelical’ and ‘evangelicalism.’

Although familiar terms, their connotation and nuance can be varied. This project has little interest in the socio-political category of the terms commonly used for American electoral demographics. Rather, for the purposes of the Plan B project, ‘evangelical’ and ‘evangelicalism’ are theological terms referring to specific doctrinal beliefs and those who organize around them.

According to Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), “Evangelicals are people of faith and should be defined by their beliefs, not by their politics or race.”<sup>8</sup>

According to a report produced by NAE and LifeWay research, there are four hallmark beliefs that form the center of evangelicalism. They include:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.<sup>9</sup>

A similar belief-focused definition is used by Timothy Larsen in the *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*. He surmises that

An evangelical is:

1. an orthodox protestant
2. who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield;

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<sup>8</sup> Bob Smietana, “What is an Evangelical? Four Questions Offer New Definition,” Christianity Today (website), published November 19, 2015, accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/november/what-is-evangelical-new-definition-nae-lifeway-research.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Smietana, “What is an Evangelical?”

3. who has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice;
4. who stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross;
5. and who stresses the world of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people.<sup>10</sup>

These two descriptions of ‘evangelical’ and ‘evangelicalism’ and their common emphasis on beliefs; centered on scripture, atonement, salvation and conversion, is how this project will use the terms, unless otherwise specified.

### *The Experience*

“The Experience” will be the terminology used in this project referring to the five-week online private Facebook interaction that is the center of the research. Participants in The Experience referred to the online interaction as “Plan B,” however, for the purposes of clarity, Plan B will refer to this project in its entirety and The Experience will refer to the specific five-week Facebook experiment.

### *Participant(s)*

Will be the terminology used in this project referring to the eighteen individuals who engaged with The Experience.

### More on the Problem and Evangelicalism

Understanding evangelicalism as a belief and doctrine-centered tradition, underscores the significance of the problem being addressed in Plan B. When communities, organizations, networks, and associations, establish identity primarily based on ideological doctrine, what

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, eds. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

happens when committed members begin to doubt and question those foundational doctrines?

What is to become of people who have long identified with evangelicalism, yet no longer see the beliefs as having correspondence or coherence? When belief and loyalty to the foundational doctrines waver, it is inevitable that one's status within the group is impacted. Belonging to the group is predicated on a strict conformity to the consensus of the group. This is the crisis event Plan B is seeking to understand and speak to.

## **Chapter Two: Presentation of Data**

The Experience consisted of 18 participants of multiple genders, with an age range representing every decade between the ages of 20 and 70. There were participants living in Australia, Canada and The United States of America. All participants had experienced significant Christian formation within an evangelical context.

The following is a collection of data and observations gathered through The Experience. In this section, relevant data will be presented and outlined. Much of the data was attained through two surveys taken by participants. The first survey was taken a week prior to the start of The Experience and the second occurred after the fifth and final week of The Experience. Phenomenological observations will occur in the preceding section.

### Understanding the Participants

#### *Views and Experience of Church*

Out of 18 participants, 17 provided information relating to their church attendance. The definition of ‘church’ was not restricted to traditional forms or structures. Rather, participants could interpret the word ‘church’ in any way it had meaning for them. The breakdown of average church attendance is as follows:

Never attends	4 Participants
Once a month (on average)	2 Participants
Twice a month (on average)	3 Participants
Three times a month (on average)	3 Participants
Weekly (on average)	5 Participants

Observation: The majority (76%) of participants were associated to some form of church when they began The Experience.

Out of those 17 who provided data on church attendance, 15 shared their current experience of church (4 of whom don't attend church regularly so chose N/A):

Very Good	1 Participant
Good	1 Participant
Fine	6 Participants
Bad	2 Participants
Very Bad	1 Participant
N/A (don't attend)	4 Participants

Observation: Only 2 participants selected Good/Very Good to describe their current church context. That is 18% of the participants. Yet 3 participants or 27% describe their current experience as bad/very bad. It is the majority, 6 participants or 55%, who's church experience is mediocre. For most participants, church is not a compelling aspect of their Christianity.

While the participants did not hold an inspiring view of their church experience, the question was asked “What keeps you associated to the church where you are?” The majority (60%) responded that it was ‘relationship’ that kept them in association. One respondent said it was the teaching, another said it was the kids program and two insisted it was a combination of teaching, kids program, and relationship.

Observation: Although most participants describe church as a mediocre experience, or worse, there is a desire to remain affiliated with their church for the sake of relationship.

This value on relationship demonstrated itself when the participants were asked “how long have you been associated with the church you identify with?” Seven out of the twelve participants (58%) currently affiliated with a church who answered this question, have been at their church for ten years or longer. Thus, the relationships that have been formed within their churches, are often deep and significant.

Observation: Participants have a great deal of relational and emotional energy invested in their church. They likely developed connections with fellow parishioners prior to experiencing the significant faith-transition they are in. To disassociate with their church is not merely a personal decision based on theology, but has deep social, relational and emotional consequences for the participants and their church.

However, the data also showed that not all the relational church connection is positive for participants. When asked to respond to the statement, “if people at church found out what I really think and believe they would judge me,” participants indicated:

Strongly Agree	5
Agree	5
Somewhat Agree	1
Disagree	2
Strongly Disagree	1

It is essential to highlight that 78% of participants felt like they could not be honest with those in their church, about their true beliefs and thoughts, without feeling judged.

Observation: When interpreting the data from the previous three survey questions, it is apparent that most participants who still affiliate with a church, do so because of relationships. These relationships are well established and long-lasting. However, even within the established

congregational relationships, there is evidence that the relationships are not a safe place to speak about doubts or share alternative perspective.

Such a conclusion is evidenced in the comments of one participant who still attended their childhood church and was currently serving in a leadership capacity. The participant commented, *“I have recently come to the conclusion that I identify as non-heterosexual – I have not yet revealed this to anyone in my church community (even those I know would support me) for fear that the higher-ups would remove me from my position in leadership.”* This sentiment reveals the explicit ‘fear’ the participant has of being honest about their sexuality. For the participant, sharing their sexual identity would mean risking position, status, relationship and belongingness within the church. One can infer from the observable data, that there is a strong relational pressure upon participants to stay within mediocre or unsatisfying church contexts, from existing relationships within those churches.

This conclusion, is supported by the recent policy decisions issued by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA (IVCF), an evangelical para-church organization operating on college campuses. According to an October 6, 2016 online story in TIME:

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA says it will start a process for “involuntary terminations” for any staffer who comes forward to disagree with its positions on human sexuality, which hold that any sexual activity outside of a husband and wife is immoral.<sup>11</sup>

IVCF is so vehemently seeking ideological uniformity that it publicly announced an ultimatum for those affiliated and employed by the organization. According to Greg Jao, an InterVarsity vice president and director of campus engagement:

“We internally categorize these as involuntary terminations due to misalignment with InterVarsity ministry principles, which is a category we use for people who leave for theological and philosophy of ministry disagreements,” Greg Jao, an

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Dias, “Top Evangelical College Group to Dismiss Employees Who Support Gay Marriage,” *Time*, October 6, 2016, <http://time.com/4521944/intervarsity-fellowship-gay-marriage/>.

InterVarsity vice president and director of campus engagement, told TIME in an email. “Our goal is not to go, ‘Oh we want you to do the dirty work of firing yourself.’ I think our thing is, if you are in disagreement, then we are going to ask you, with integrity, to identify that and leave.”<sup>12</sup>

IVCF has made it policy that affiliation with the organization is contingent upon full ideological consensus. There is the explicit threat of employment loss and relational isolation for those who do not conform. Therefore, as suggested by the above data, the participant’s articulation of fear and evidenced in the termination policy of IVCF, evangelical organizations often coerce their members into sustained affiliation under the threat of excommunication and isolation.

### *Spirituality*

Imperative to understanding the faith of the participants, is to inquire beyond their affiliation to church, seeking to understand their broader relationship to the spiritual life. In a pre-experience survey, participants were asked five questions designed to help ascertain what spirituality and faith looked like for them.<sup>13</sup>

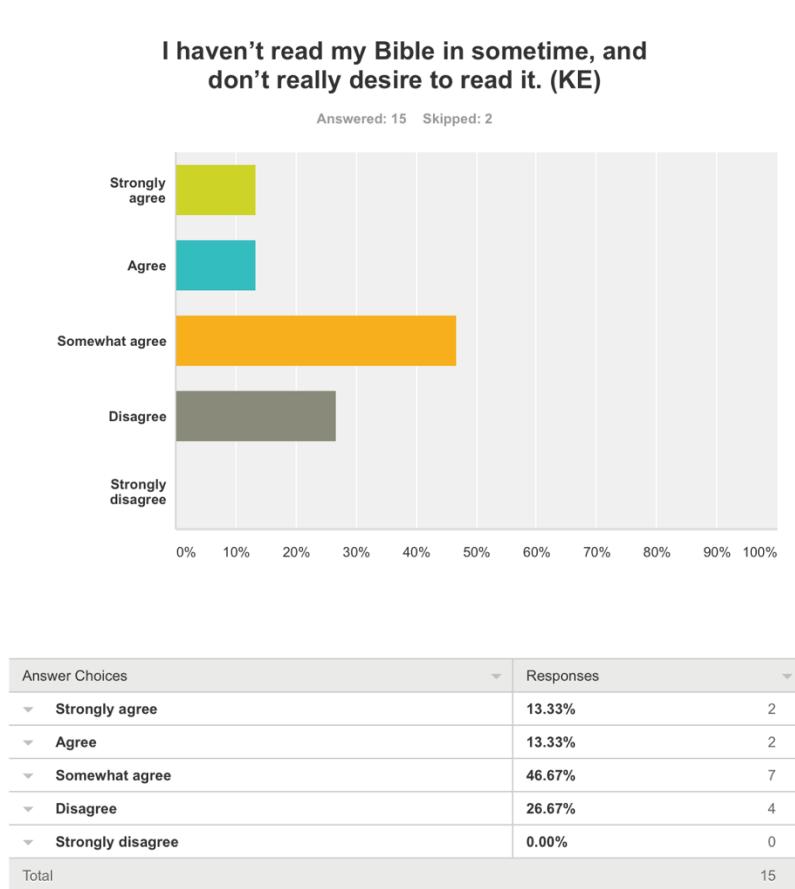
The first question asked participants if anyone “in the last 12 months had anyone expressed concern for your faith/spiritual life.” Of the 15 responses, eight participants declared that someone had expressed concern, while seven claimed no one had shown concern for their spiritual life. The other four questions are represented in the graphs below:

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<sup>12</sup> Dias.

<sup>13</sup> Survey questions inspired by Kathy Escobar, *Faith Shift* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014), 3–4.

### Survey Question 8:



Observation: This stands out as a remarkable insight into the spiritual lives of the participants. It reveals that 73% of those whom responded, are willing to admit some level of apathy and complacency around bible reading. Recalling the significance of biblical engagement in the definition of evangelical,<sup>14</sup> this graph emphasizes the transition taking place in those who participated. There is a moving away from that which sits at the very core of evangelicalism.

One possible reason for the expressed disinterest in the bible, was captured in the comment of one participant who admitted, “I opened my bible last week – but the scripture passage included yuckiness so I closed it again.” As evangelicalism has educated its members to

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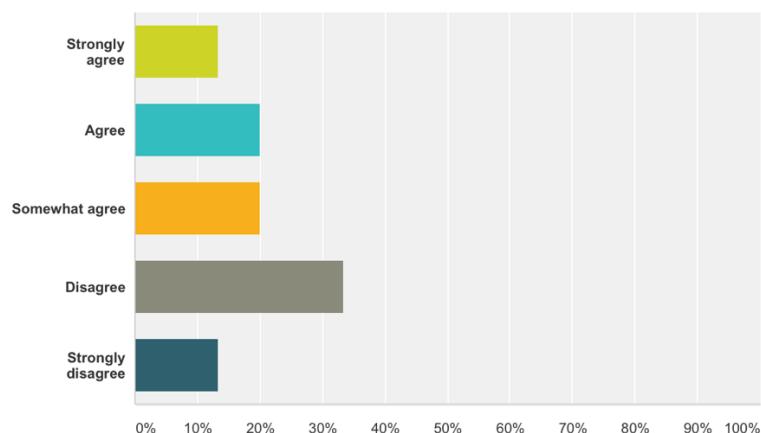
<sup>14</sup> “Who has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice.” Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism.” 1.

understand the scriptures literally, at least one participant would rather ignore the bible altogether than be confronted with a difficult passage. It seems that some participants struggled with what to make of the bible when parts of it do not seem coherent with the ideal of a loving God. This reinforces the data accumulated from the PPRI survey revealing 60% of those who are religiously unaffiliated have chosen to be so because, “they stopped believing in the religions teaching.”<sup>15</sup>

#### Survey Question 9:

**I feel disoriented in my spiritual life. I know I can't go back, but I definitely don't know where this is going.**

Answered: 15 Skipped: 2



Answer Choices	Responses
Strongly agree	13.33% 2
Agree	20.00% 3
Somewhat agree	20.00% 3
Disagree	33.33% 5
Strongly disagree	13.33% 2
Total	15

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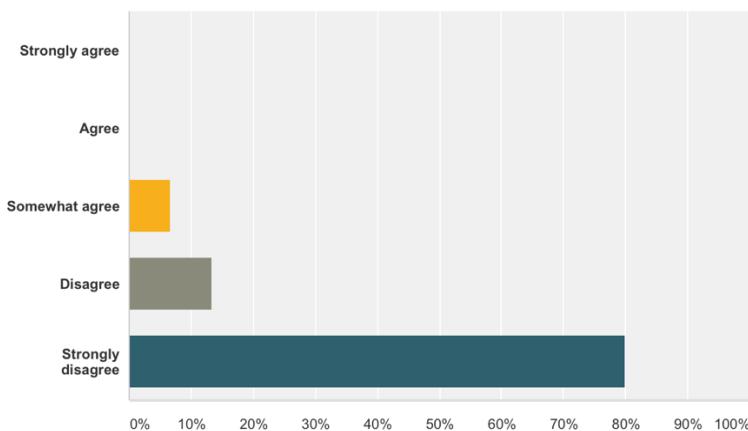
<sup>15</sup> Betsy Cooper et al., “Exodus.”

Observation: It appears The Experience included participants in various stages of the faith-transition process. Some participants had yet to take a significant step toward a post-evangelical faith, finding security within evangelicalism<sup>16</sup> and others were in the various stages of a faith-transition process. Just over 53% of the participants, identify as disoriented in their spiritual life.

#### Survey Question 10:

**I secretly worry that God is angry at me and might discipline me for thinking differently.  
(KE)**

Answered: 15 Skipped: 2



Answer Choices	Responses
Strongly agree	0.00% 0
Agree	0.00% 0
Somewhat agree	6.67% 1
Disagree	13.33% 2
Strongly disagree	80.00% 12
Total	15

Observation: Participants had given up the notion of a coercive god who detests questions, doubts and alternative approaches to faith.

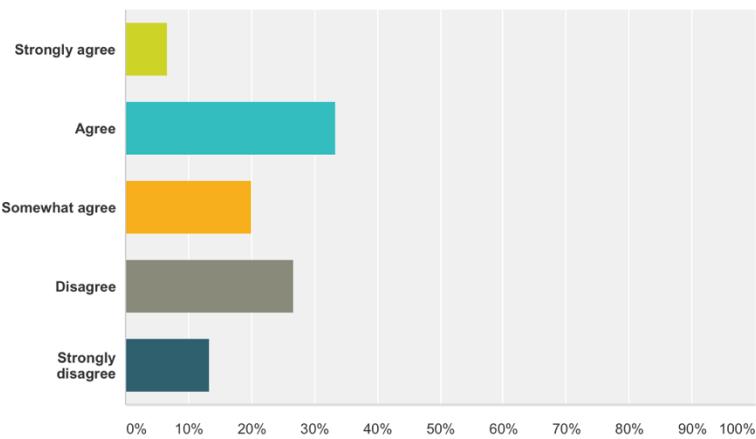
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<sup>16</sup> One participant admitted during The Experience that he was content within mainstream evangelicalism, but viewed this as a learning experience.

Survey Question 13:

**I feel a sense of isolation in my spirituality. I don't have a space where I can be honest about where I am at.**

Answered: 15 Skipped: 2



Answer Choices	Responses
Strongly agree	6.67%
Agree	33.33%
Somewhat agree	20.00%
Disagree	26.67%
Strongly disagree	13.33%
Total	15

Observation: 60% of participants feel they are lacking a space of authentic engagement for their faith and spirituality.

Observation 2: Many of the participants have difficulty incorporating the bible (as understood through evangelical formation) into their evolving faith. Although this puts them on the fringe of evangelicalism, they have no fear of divine retribution. There is however, a lack of safe space where faith and spirituality can be authentically explored for their emerging faith. There is also a sense of disorientation in not knowing where their spirituality is heading as it moves further away from the evangelical core.

### *Religious Affiliation*

The data received from the pre-Experience survey is consistent with the broader research demonstrating the increased and purposeful distancing of many in their religious affiliation.<sup>17</sup> For several participants, the intentional disassociation with evangelicalism, is expressed as a strong reaction against the tradition. A sample of participant comments includes:

I'm finding it really hard to be a part of a church that is struggling to follow Christ's decree of love, humility and justice and is staying in the shallows of faith, sticking to doctrine which for me became stale and unrelated so long ago, not to mention seems so far from the way I understand God.

I don't want to be grouped with those people anymore.

I increasingly felt uncomfortable being identified with a church (big C and little c) who looked like more of an exclusive country club where you sought to belong, and right thinking determined who was in and who was out.

Not wanting to be associated with the current way that most “Christians”, Baptist, church goers are perceived. I'm embarrassed to a large degree by those who share my faith as judgmental as that may sound.

Why would I want to identify with evangelicals was are fearful and punitive in their understanding or interpretation of who God is.

These statements reveal the angst many participants feel toward evangelicalism. The intentional disassociation was unapologetically voiced by many who would have previously identified as evangelical.

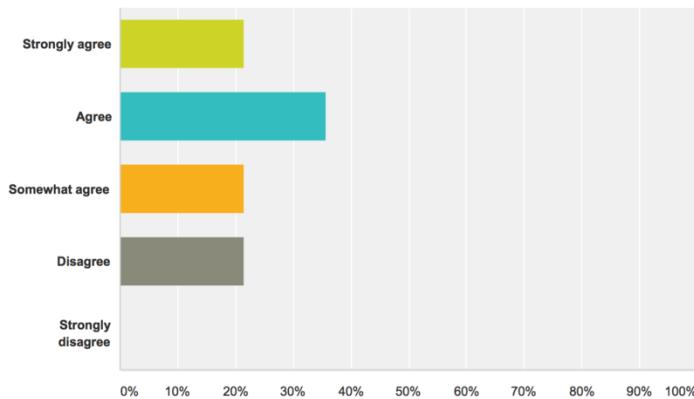
This data also demonstrates that the trend toward non-affiliation, includes a deteriorating respect for local evangelical leadership. Participants were asked to respond to the following statement: “I have lost respect for those who claim spiritual authority in my church, and no longer see them as a resource for my journey.” The clear majority responded affirmatively that they no longer view their church’s leadership as a trusted resource.

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapter One, *Importance of the Problem*.

**Q11 I have lost respect for those who claim spiritual authority in my church, and no longer see them as a resource for my journey. (KE)**

Answered: 14 Skipped: 3



Answer Choices	Responses
Strongly agree	21.43%
Agree	35.71%
Somewhat agree	21.43%
Disagree	21.43%
Strongly disagree	0.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>

A staggering 77% of the participants who responded admit to losing some degree of respect for their church's leadership. The participants are skeptical of their church's leadership ability to help them navigate a post-evangelical expression of faith. However, this 2/3 of participants haven't given up all hope on leadership, mentorship and spiritual direction for their lives. Throughout The Experience, participant dialogue was full of quotes and articles from other spiritual leaders and activists. It was evident that the theological formation function that would normally be filled by a local pastor was being fulfilled by well known public theologians and writers, that would never qualify for evangelical orthodoxy. For example, it was almost daily that participants posted or quoted writings from Father Richard Rohr. As a Franciscan priest, Rohr's articulation of the faith-life, regularly found resonance with participants on any number of

different topic trends. Other regularly quoted thinkers include Rob Bell, Greg Boyd, Peter Rollins and Brian McLaren.

Based on the data gained in the survey responses and the regular references made to public thinkers and pastors in the comment streams, it is evident that the majority of participants did not consider their local church pastor relevant for their faith formation. Rather, it is the wisdom and experience of well-known authors and thinkers of post-evangelical faith that had more resonance. It could be concluded that the participants are less likely to affiliate with a specific religious tradition or church, but are seeking to affiliate with thinkers, activist and causes that have correspondence with life and faith experience.

### **Chapter Three: Phenomenological Observations**

Having outlined the current meta-trends related to declining religious affiliation, as well as the religious and spiritual perspectives of the participants, this project will now begin to explore the phenomenology of The Experience. Within this chapter, the experiences of both the facilitator and participants will be examined. Due to the number of participants, not everyone's experience will be detailed. However, this chapter will seek to demonstrate trends amongst the participants as represented in three specific individuals: Robert, Jonathan and Mary,<sup>18</sup> each whom took a unique trajectory through The Experience.

The initial hypothesis of this project contends that people are leaving evangelicalism, in part because their lived experience of the world no longer corresponds with the dominate consensus of evangelicalism.<sup>19</sup> In this shift, many are searching for an alternative space for safe, honest, reflective exploration. The following chapter outlines what five weeks in such a space looked like for the facilitator and participants. The following section contains stories of what occurred, while introducing some of those who journeyed through The Experience.

#### **Phenomenological Reflections of the Facilitator**

Facilitating The Experience, was a unique opportunity. The following section will expand on the phenomenology of The Experience from the perspective of the facilitator.

#### *Creating Contexts of Consensus*

In meeting with Tripp Fuller in December 2016, he suggested that The Experience's weekly teaching video should begin with a personal narrative demonstrating my own cognitive

<sup>18</sup> Names and identifying aspects of the participants have been altered to protect their anonymity.

<sup>19</sup> This is consistent with the previously cited PRRI research (Betsy Cooper et al., "Exodus."), revealing that 60% of those who identify as religiously unaffiliated do so because they no longer believe the teaching of their religion. In other words, the majority of those religiously unaffiliated say their religion's teaching no longer has correspondence or coherence with the world as they experience it.

dissonance with evangelicalism. Cognitive dissonance is a theory pioneered by social psychologist Leon Festinger. Festinger first demonstrated that if a person holds two beliefs or cognitions that are intellectually incongruent, the individual experiences “a negative drive state” or dissonance.<sup>20</sup> Just as one responds to the negative drive state of hunger by seeking food or of thirst by seeking water, Festinger showed how humans will automatically seek to reduce cognitive dissonance by changing one or both understandings so they are more consistent.

The narratives were designed to be a non-antagonistic demonstration of how cognitive dissonance may be experienced within evangelicalism’s doctrine. For example, in week two, the story was told of Annand,<sup>21</sup> the owner of a local sandwich shop in the neighborhood in which I was a pastor. As a lunch-time regular at the sandwich shop, it didn’t take long for Annand and I to become friends. He was a new Canadian who had immigrated from India with his wife, and young child. Annand was a devout Sikh.

The friendship with Annand grew in such a way that he invited me to his temple, where I met with and shared a meal with the temple’s spiritual leaders. Annand had a rich faith that worked for his family and his ancestors for generations. Annand’s family, faced several challenges as immigrants, small business owners and new parents, in which Annand regularly articulated how Sikhism sustained him. It was a deep, beautiful and inspiring faith.

This is one place cognitive dissonance emerged between my friendship with Annand and my evangelical tradition. As an evangelical, I had a responsibility to convince Annand that his religion was inferior, he was eternally separated from God and he and his family lacked the truth that could only be attained within evangelicalism. In fact, if he rejected Christianity, he would

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<sup>20</sup> Elliot Aronson, “Back to the Future: Retrospective Review of Leon Festinger’s ‘A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,’ *American Journal of Psychology* 110, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 127.

<sup>21</sup> Alias used.

suffer eternal damnation from a god whom I was to convince him, loved him. The problem was obvious: Annand's Sikh faith was beautiful, meaningful and inspirational. What kind of friend would I be to tell him he was wrong and destined for hell? How could I seriously claim God loved him and would send him to hell for his Sikh faith, in the same breath. There was obvious cognitive dissonance.

As I told this story, the aim was to elicit a relatable cognitive dissatisfaction amongst the participants. The intention was that they would recognize the 'negative drive' created when holding to evangelical dogma. Each week would begin with a narrative accentuating and articulating areas of cognitive dissonance many feel within evangelicalism. German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg insisted "if truth can only be one, the things that are regarded as true will not contradict one another, and they can be united with one another."<sup>22</sup> These weekly narratives successfully opened space for participants to see potential gaps compromising a unity of truth within evangelicalism.

As suggested, participants found resonance with the first-person narratives and related to the cognitive dissonance they demonstrated. More effective than creating the videos around a theological argument that needed to be defended, the narratives transcended theological debate and connected with participants in an intuitive/emotive way. This resulted in a nearly universal point of commonality. With a narrative resonance established, facilitating a coherent theological reframe became much less daunting. This is not to suggest however that The Experience was without its facilitation challenges.

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<sup>22</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1991), 19.

### *Creating Context for Conversation*

Each Sunday, The Experience began with a twenty-five-minute introductory video outlining the week's topic.<sup>23</sup> In response to the video, participants would engage with a discussion question, sharing their thoughts as comments beneath the video. Originally, these were intended to be opportunities for theological discussion where participants could interact with theological concepts and explore nuanced differences.

However, after the first two weeks it became evident that the discussion was noticeably stunted. As soon as one person shared, the comments that followed were mostly expressions of consensus. Participants would affirm what had already been said and proceed to tell their own similar version. For example, during the first week, Jordan commented:

You've articulated so many of my feelings here as well, Samantha. Evangelism in the literal sense has always felt so wrong and pushy to me. It has always made more sense to me to evangelize through our actions and make people wonder why we're different.

Jordan, although eager to affirm what Samantha is saying, does not contribute anything more to the discussion beyond an echo. Similarly, Justine posted within the same comment thread:

I hear ya, Samantha. I just saw "Silence" and for someone who spent 40+ years in cross cultural missionary work trying to "save" people, that movie left me with a lot of questions. So many in fact, that I am working on going to see it again. It is deeply thought provoking and troubling, wrestling with some of the issues you raise.

Both comments demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the video and discussion, yet lacked a more meaningful personal vulnerability. While demonstrating how quickly consensus was forming the project had hoped to move beyond echoing "Amens."

Frustrated by the anemic nature of the discussion within the first two weeks, I knew something in my facilitating had to be adjusted. It was then that I decided to shift from asking for

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix A for links to the videos.

theological opinions, to soliciting “gut” responses.<sup>24</sup> Rather than discussing their own theological perspective about the topic, participants were invited to write and share with the group in the form of a letter to an unnamed friend who might be concerned for their faith. Although each week’s video had substantial theological weight, it was remarkable how the letters opened group interaction. Participants began to share beyond what they had heard an author say, or had always wondered about. Rather, participants began to share their hearts, their isolation, their frustration and the deeper parts of their story.

With the insightful, vulnerable and heartfelt responses that flowed from this exercise, I realized I had set out to facilitate the wrong thing. It was not a theological discussion the participants were longing for,<sup>25</sup> but an opportunity to be vulnerable and open with each other. They wanted a place to hear and be heard; to express their pain and frustration and know others could relate. There was far less interest in discussing the metaphysical reality of ‘Hell’ and far more energy to share the knots and bruises they carried in their hearts. This is exactly what Jason from California expressed when he wrote in his letter to an anonymous friend:

...truth be told though, the women and men you call false prophets are ones I look up to and here's why. They're being HONEST! for the first time ever, people are actually being transparent. life is awesome and difficult, it is confusing and clear, it's painful and beautiful. i am working hard to embrace it all and throw off the notion that I am NOTHING without a savior. I am something and I don't think that makes me self-obsessed.

Likewise, Samantha from Western Canada wrote:

In the past few years I have been slowly tearing down the walls of my beliefs. The space that once felt so safe had become cramped and claustrophobic. It has been a

<sup>24</sup> For example, in week one I asked participants to respond to “Where have you felt a lack of correspondence between the faith of your past and your experiences in the world?” In week two I asked, “If all of creation has only ever existed within God, so that Christianity wasn’t a system of ‘achieving God’, but an acknowledgment and a celebration of our place in Christ; where do you think Christians would need to refocus their energies? What’s appealing to you about this description of the God/creation relationship or what do you find troubling about it?”

<sup>25</sup> Contrary to my original hypothesis outlined in Chapter One.

long and arduous process. When a wall comes down it seems like there's always another one standing just outside, keeping me in. But the further I get, the broader the space around me, the more exciting it is. The fear and worry are replaced with awe and wonder.

God is love, and we are meant to know love and show love. But nothing kills love quite like worry. As I stop trying to fit God into the small rigid box of classical Catholic/Orthodox/Evangelical theology I feel a freedom from the worry. In this broader understanding of God that I have come to, I am free to love instead of worrying about whether or not I am believing correctly.

This vulnerability and openness became even more apparent in week four. The response activity was to write a prayer, poem or song for a friend or community who has been wounded by loss. The objective was to write something that reflected the weeks' theme of a non-omnipotent, non-controlling God who is not the author of suffering. The poems were intimate and exposing. One participant even created a Facebook Live video, performing a song she had written for the occasion. The lyrics captured the emergence of vulnerability that would remain elusive to theological discussion alone. The songwriter hit perfect pitch as they sang into their iPhone:

I see your hurt, your pain is clear  
 And I don't know how to take away your fear  
 The road ahead is dark, let's not pretend we understand  
 The wound is very deep; All I can do is take your hand.  
 Because there is a love bigger than the great ache  
 There is a peace, a promise that will never break;  
 All I know, is that I know, there is a love.

The exercises of weeks three and four were fostering a deeper connection amongst participants. There arose a commonality and appreciation for each other that happened not in dialogue around doctrinal nuance, but in sharing creative expressions. Participants much preferred to use their ideas to create, express and connect with something constructive. They were eager for their emerging faith to reflect the reality they were living. It was in this experience that I realized that facilitating such a space required not just a theologian who could

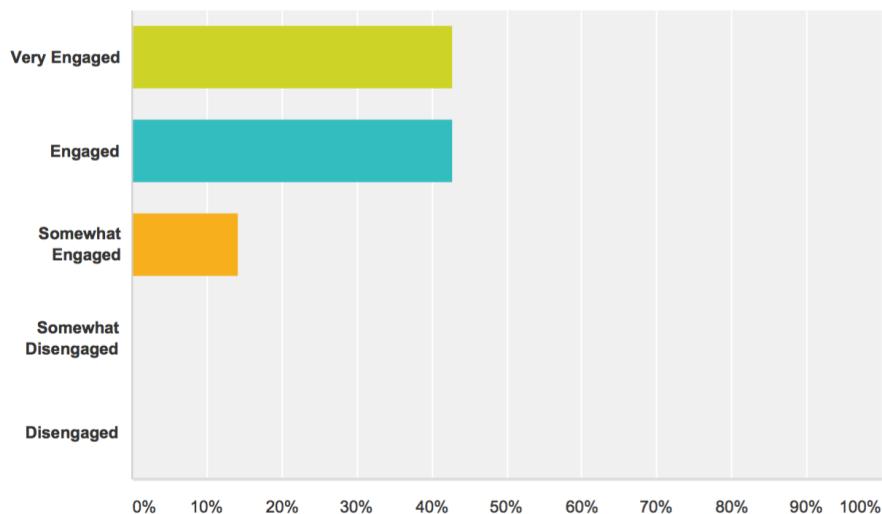
help people rethink doctrine, but a pastor/theologian, who could give people the space to grieve, express, share, rant, reveal and remain cared for as they processed the emotional and relational impact related to their shifting theology. This was the role I gladly pivoted toward for the second half of The Experience.

### Phenomenological Reflections on the Participants

In the follow-up survey conducted a week after the conclusion of The Experience, participants were asked to describe their engagement level with the 5-week online experiment. The results were positive:

#### **Q1 I would describe my engagement with Plan B as:**

Answered: 14   Skipped: 0



With 85% of participants describing themselves as “engaged” or “very engaged” in The Experience, we will now attempt to outline what occurred for many.<sup>26</sup> To accomplish this, three

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<sup>26</sup> The graph demonstrates that 14 of the 18 participants responded. It could be suggested that 4 participants were not engaged enough to even take the exit survey, thereby skewing the results. However, the trend remains consistent that most those who joined The Experience engaged with it significantly.

participant's stories (identifying details altered for anonymity) will be outlined, demonstrating the trends in the participant experience.

### *Three Unique Trajectories*

Robert:

Robert's engagement with The Experience is symbolic of a handful of participants. As he began The Experience he was well established (although with considerable angst) within evangelicalism's borders. Evangelicalism, is more than Robert's religious affiliations, it is also his career. Through his full-time work with a conservative para-church organization, Robert depends on his evangelical identity for his spiritual and social connections, as well as his livelihood. That is not to say that Robert is content within his tradition. In fact, Robert's engagement with The Experience was often more intense than other participants'. He seemed to value the confidential space in which he could openly express his dissatisfaction for evangelical postures around LGBTQ exclusion and coercive notions about God. Early in The Experience he posted:

Sadly I have seen in the last 5 years people hurt each other in the church in unexplainable ways. To be honest it wrecked me. It's been a few years of deep grieving and questioning is this a faith I was to be apart of. I've gripped tight to my roots of Love God, and Love others. Whenever I can. Most weeks I almost quit my job, left the church and left my town. But something has kept me here. I keep Loving and out of that I have seen and experienced some healing and some new life. Great and deep relationships have formed and my faith continues to grow. 2nd would be the ever popular LGBTQ debate. The most frustrating thing for me on this topic is it has never been a debate for me. I grew up in a house that this was a non issue. I have 2 Gay cousins, Gay uncles, Gay friends. To think people don't love or welcome them or want them around because of Who they love is mind blowing to me.

Yet, evangelicalism was so much integrated into Robert's faith, he showed no momentum toward leaving the tradition. While other participants had disassociated from or were actively leaving evangelicalism, for Robert leaving was unfathomable. His beliefs, at times even public,

contradicted evangelical orthodoxy, yet, he was determined to exist within the tension. Robert was even hopeful that evangelicalism itself might transition into a more generous and inclusive space. During the third week of The Experience he wrote:

Now that my [spouse] and I have a [child], and we are in [specific] ministry and have the potential to affect so many lives, our goal is never to get them to think like we do. Our goal is to first love them. Know them. Provide a safe place in our home and in our presence. THEN, perhaps by God's grace, they will trust us enough to give us the chance and opportunity to expand their thinking - again, not into our thoughts - but to just tap into a world that is bigger, more beautiful, and more inspiring than they ever imagined it could be. A world where God is seen in and through everything.

Throughout The Experience, Robert regularly expressed both optimism that evangelicalism can progress and intense frustration at its inability to do so. This is the spiritual space Robert found himself living his faith from, a place in which he felt diminishing theological coherence yet deep life entanglement with the tradition. Robert regularly expressed his appreciation for having The Experience as a space to connect with like-minded Christians to explore issues of faith that could not be openly explored within his evangelical network.

Jonathan:

Like Robert, Jonathan is representative of several participants. In fact, the largest segment of those who did The Experience seem to share a resemblance to Jonathan. Until recently, Jonathan and his family were committed evangelical church-goers. He was involved in leading church programs, he attended regularly and believed in the cause of his local church. However, in the past couple years his faith and his commitment to the evangelical church has been in transition. Introducing himself to the group he writes about himself:

I've felt a real struggle the past couple years. I've always been a believer that Jesus loves everyone. I had always been led to believe that church was a safe place, a place where I could be myself, be accepted for who I was and what I believed and being part of a church community was important to us as a family - we wanted to raise our children in a God-centred environment, with other Christians. It's been in

the past couple years when discussions came up regarding excluding certain groups of people, specifically LGBT that I felt my faith traditions challenged. The Jesus I knew and loved and teach my kids about loves everyone. I saw reactions I never came to expect, and this made me start to question being part of that church community. As *we made the decision to leave* and have since looked into some other churches, but *have had difficulty finding one that is the right fit, it's made me question going to church* - isn't God a loving God that loves everyone, and therefore shouldn't everyone be accepted, regardless of ethnicity, gender or marital status at church? *We work hard to teach our kids that everyone should be treated fairly yet in our church communities this isn't always the case.* (italics added)

Whereas Robert remained within his evangelical context and saw The Experience as an outlet for the conversations he wanted to have, Jonathan had left evangelicalism because he felt it was incapable of taking the conversations to where he need to go.

The unique thing about Jonathan's situation is that although he had left evangelicalism and its exclusionary posture; he very much missed the community and relationships that were represented within it. On multiple occasions Jonathan and others exchanged messages about finding a progressive and inclusive church. He was not prepared to return to the narrow tradition of his past, yet longed for somewhere new to belong and be involved. In a post from week three, the group got a sense of what Jonathan experiences having left evangelicalism while not yet knowing where his faith would take him. He writes:

All my life I've been carrying the weight of worry, second guessing every thought. I needed to be sure, but nothing was ever certain. In the past I have held tight to my beliefs, it was so important that they be sure. I made my beliefs into protective walls in an uncertain world and it was comfortable inside those walls. So. Very. Comfortable. It was my world and I was in control. At least it would look that way to anyone on the outside. Inside, all the worries were still there and it was getting a little cramped.

In the past few years I have been slowly tearing down the walls of my beliefs. The space that once felt so safe had become cramped and claustrophobic. It has been a long and arduous process. When a wall comes down it seems like there's always another one standing just outside, keeping me in. But the further I get, the broader the space around me, the more exciting it is. The fear and worry are replaced with awe and wonder.

Here Jonathan describes a compelling freedom that inspires him and calls him forward. Although uncertain what is to come, there is no returning to the evangelical confines. Yet he continues to feel a loss and sadness in having to leave.

Jonathan seemed right at home within The Experience. It was a place where he found others who shared his theological convictions and passion. This is evidenced in his following post:

YES! YES! YES!! (Forgive my overly enthusiastic beginning.) When my wife introduced this very foreign idea to me years ago - that Christ actually gave up power as a gift of love for us - the conservative in me could not grasp it at first. It took me some good time and reflection to let this truth soak in to my being, and start to change my idea of God. So I am overjoyed to hear it ring true for others. Thank you.

During The Experience, Jonathan found a temporary tribe, like-minded people whom he had not found in his previous church experience and whom he had not yet found within another church. The Experience, reminded Jonathan that he was not alone and there are others in similar situations.

Mary:

A third group of participants are represented by Mary. Like Robert and Jonathan, Mary has deep evangelical roots. Where Mary's scenario differs, is in the fact that she has not only left evangelicalism (like Jonathan), she has also found a new home in a new tradition. Whereas Robert was remaining within evangelicalism, and Jonathan had disassociated but was uncertain of what is to come next; Mary had reestablished herself amongst like-mind people. She summarizes her experience in her comment on another participant's post:

I can express my exhaustion with being the "liberal" one at my former church. I don't know whether to take it as a compliment or an insult, but no one really engaged with me in asking how my faith was evolving. One person did as part of a larger conversation over coffee. One old timer used to ask me snarky, stupid political questions. I often felt though, that if I wasn't there, one less voice would be

heard in the mix. I also loved a lot of people there. I'm at the point that I don't feel particularly called/interested/inclined to hold the minority position on things like LGBTQ relationships/place in the church. I also don't want to be associated with churches that hold those positions. No one would attend a church that didn't allow interracial marriage, would they? Why should we, if we support same-sex marriage, attend a church that doesn't? I have to say it's particularly wonderful to walk into church week (and during the week) and not be in disagreement; to be focused on living the kingdom here and now and expanding it and its blessings to those near and far. It just feels amazing.

Although, Mary's situation was in the minority within the Experience, she does represent a couple of others. These are people who have moved beyond evangelicalism and settled within a community that reflects their faith.

Mary was an invaluable contributor to the Experience. She often encouraged others that there was life, faith and belonging on the other side of a faith transition. Participants regularly engaged Mary with questions concerning the journey and how she had found a new community. Although, many of the ideas discussed within The Experience were not new to Mary, she brought a mature voice of reason and understanding to the many others who were still working

### *Stepping into The Experience*

#### Practicing Plan B:

During The Experience, discussions regularly focused on the participants' desire to put the principles being discussed into practice. For example, when the week's teaching video focused on framing God as non-coercive rather than coercive and retributive, participants were quick to take the idea and apply it to their lived experience. One participant who teaches high school, initiated a discussion about how hard it is disciplining students non-coercively. What emerged was a beautiful discussion relating to how so often the students who are least enjoyable, are the ones who need to be loved the most. The discussion brilliantly transcribed a post-evangelical doctrine about divine non-coercion and translated it for the classroom.

This discussion also led to a couple of parents sharing about their struggle to relate to their children in a way they felt confident about. Another participant, related one of the theological principles to how she was facilitating a book club. There seemed to be great satisfaction in the participant's discussion as they began to create a correspondence between the principles being discussed and the reality of the lives they were living.

#### Unheard Voices Emerge:

An unexpected phenomenon of The Experience, was the depth of engagement from those known to be introverts.<sup>27</sup> The online platform, seemed the ideal medium to amplify introverted-voices. Early on, there were noticeable contributions made by multiple introverts. Having spent significant time with some of these participants, they tend to say very little. However, during The Experience, these introverts contributed immensely in their written responses. The observation should be made that the Facebook online platform, was ideal for introverted people who often prefer a bit more time to process a discussion. The medium allowed them to engage at a depth the rest of the group had not realized. In fact, it was these introverts that helped the conversation achieve greater depth.

#### Prayer as a Symptom:

For many evangelicals, prayer is a straightforward exercise. One need only ask, confess, adore, honor or petition the God who hears and responds with Divine wisdom and omnipotence. For several participants, this straightforward exchange no longer had coherence. An interesting discussion unfolded amongst participants in which several people began to discuss their confusion and ambiguity around prayer.

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<sup>27</sup> Although I had not met every participant, I knew the majority well as former congregants.

One participant explained that s/he no longer knew who to pray to. S/he described the options as, ‘an energy’ and ‘the universe.’ Another participant admitted that s/he has come to a point of recognizing that there is nothing “magical” in prayer, so wondered what its purpose was. Similarly, another participant mused about how s/he no longer viewed God as omnipotent or able to intervene, so struggled to see prayer’s purpose.

With these foundational questions relating to prayer, it appeared many of those experiencing a faith transition or a crisis of correspondence and coherence, need intentional support in finding new ways to imagine long-standing Christian practices. With so much confusion around prayer, a reasonable hypothesis is that participants would benefit from ongoing pastoral input for forming alternative approaches for the Christian faith post-evangelicalism.

In this sense, ‘prayer’ seemed to be a signifier of a greater need. When one’s faith is formed within a narrow tradition like evangelicalism, any Christian doctrine or practice that is not explicitly evangelical can seem foreign and even suspect. For participants to continue to relate to Christianity beyond evangelicalism, thoughtful pastoral leadership connecting groups to the broader Christian tradition and alternative approaches would be of great value.

Another example of this revealed itself from the evangelical commitment to a literal scriptural hermeneutic. Most evangelical assertions about God, humanity or the world correspond to a supporting biblical text. Many of the participants, intentionally expressed their move away from a ‘biblically-confined’ version of Christianity. It was repeatedly stressed by several participants that they preferred to focus on love, justice, beauty, and goodness more than the bible. The biblical depictions of God as loving, kind and compassionate were embraced, while the violent, retributive, angry depictions of God were quickly dismissed or

compartmentalized. Participants were less concerned with an evangelical biblical coherence, and were very committed to embracing a faith that corresponded to love, justice, beauty and goodness.

In fact, a regular term which emerged in the discussions was “cherry-picking.” Participants were more than willing to admit they ‘cherry-pick’ the pieces of the biblical narrative that are consistent with their understanding of love, and ignore the parts that don’t. For example, when the Wesleyan quadrilateral was introduced to participants within this discussion, there was a near celebratory relief that there were other historical Christian options for engaging and valuing the text. Participants seemed eager to connect their faith to the larger Christian tradition and showed genuine enthusiasm for this information.

Connection:

Although 65% of participants attend church at least twice a month, the initial survey revealed that many do so unenthusiastically (only 12% relate their church experience as good or very good). At the beginning of the second week a handful of participants began to suggest unsolicited, that The Experience’s format, could work well for them *as church*. They were connecting with the videos and the discussions and felt The Experience was richer for them than most of their conventional church-life. In one phone conversation, a participant admitted s/he was telling people that he was experimenting within an ‘online church’ (referring to The Experience).

It appears that the environment of acceptance and discovery was in part, the environment longed for by participants. Even with the limits of the online medium, it seemed like a virtual authentic connection, often had more meaning for participants than face to face contact with those whom didn’t appreciate their questioning of consensus.

### Desire for Church:

A reoccurring conversation throughout the duration of The Experience related to the participant's desire to find a church that aligned with their emerging post-evangelical values. Many participants still desired to be connected to a church/faith community. Those who participated in The Experience were not 'the Dones' (a term used to describe those who were once involved in church but have determined that they are now 'done' with all things church).<sup>28</sup> A better description for this group would be 'the Exiled.' Evangelicalism would not/could not make room for them...and for that, they did not desire evangelicalism.

Participants were not willing to compromise their social conscience by attending narrow minded, exclusive communities of their past. However, they regularly discussed options for generous faith communities where other non-Christian traditions and LGBTQ peoples were fully included. Much of the discussion centered around the desire to immerse their children in Christian community, but not at the expense of implicitly or explicitly exclusive doctrine. This seemed to be the gap for the post-evangelical participants. The desire was still for the familiarity of church (singing, teaching, Eucharist, spiritual friendship) yet defied the narrowness of evangelical consensus. Based on participant's discussions, a 'post-evangelical type church' is highly sought after.

A reasonable conclusion from the discussions is that there is a great opportunity for innovation within churches/communities sympathetic to those who are leaving or have left evangelicalism. This raises important questions which will be explored in the next section around what community might look like for the ever-increasing post-evangelical demographic? What might community look like for those who are conditioned to be a part of a faith community, but

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<sup>28</sup> Joshua Packard, "Meet the 'Dones,'" Christianity Today (website), published Summer 2015, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2015/summer-2015/meet-dones.html>.

aspire to something more generous and expansive? The Experience provided a glimpse of post-evangelical safe space for people, however numerous comments lamented on the lack of personal contact with others.

#### Presumed Pluralism:

Early in the foray of discussion, it became obvious that a posture of pluralism was valued and practiced by most participants. Upon sharing the story of befriending a Sikh man named Annand and describing how the friendship forced my own rethinking of previously held perceptions of religious exclusivity; many in the group expressed the same sentiment. Based on the content of the discussions and interactions, participants in The Experience had disassociated from the evangelical ethos of exclusivism and had already made the turn toward an inclusive pluralism. There was a deep commitment amongst participants to Christ and Christian tradition, however, participants also valued and honored the validity of non-Christian traditions.

It should be noted that those who were willing to explore a post-modern expression of Christianity (online, open ended, non-creedal), like The Experience, were already post-modern in their approach to other religions. Participants had moved beyond the limitations of evangelicism's either/or thinking and had fully embraced a both/and paradox.

#### Political Backdrop:

As both Matthew and Luke tell their version of the Jesus story, they establish the political context. Jesus is born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, under King Herod. To fully appreciate the Advent narrative and its implications, the political reality of the moment must be identified. Similarly, The Experience was give birth during the reign of United States President Donald Trump. Although overtly political discussions were avoided, it seemed the Trump-reality simmered beneath the surface of nearly every discussion. This was especially discernable when

participants would critique their former tradition or highlight something hypocritical or narrow-minded within evangelicalism.

It seems like the reality of Donald Trump as president and evangelical support of him, had expedited the discomfort level of those moving toward a post-evangelical experience of Christianity. Perhaps Trump has served as an accelerant for many already dissatisfied with the tone of evangelical elitism. In fact, research done by the Pew Research Group at the time of The Experience revealed that “eight-in-ten white evangelical Protestants who attend church at least once a month approve of the way Trump is handling his job as president, including 67% who *strongly* approve of his job performance.”<sup>29</sup>

Theology never happens in a vacuum, but reflects the world in which it seeks to describe/critique. The reality of the Trump presidency, gave participants already disillusioned with evangelicalism more to critique.

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<sup>29</sup> Gregory A Smith, “Among White Evangelicals, Regular Church Goers Are the Most Supportive of Trump,” Pew Research Center, published April 26, 2017, accessed May 7, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/26/among-white-evangelicals-regular-churchgoers-are-the-most-supportive-of-trump>.

## **Chapter Four: Phenomenological Interpretation and Analysis**

In this next section, the aim of the project will be to give an expanded interpretation and analysis of what occurred within The Experience. This will allow for a more detailed exploration of why the participants engaged with The Experience the way they did. Achieving this objective will require an intentional three-stage focus exploring 1) the epistemological crisis of participants, 2) the nature of human transition as observed in the work of William Bridges and 3) the relevance of human belongingness theory for those considering disassociating from evangelicalism. Utilizing, these three spheres, as well as the biblical example of St. Paul's faith-transition and existential crisis, this project seeks to provide the reader with a comprehensive outline of the personal impact incurred by many of the participants and how The Experience sought to address it.

### Epistemological Crisis

The desire to disassociate from evangelicalism is unimaginable for those committed to its core. This is where the title for this project, Plan B originates. Remaining evangelical is the assumed 'Plan A' for those within the tradition. Disassociation is unimaginable when the tradition is first embraced. Consequently, this project will seek to demonstrate that disassociation with evangelicalism often becomes necessary when one experiences an epistemological breakdown of 1) correspondence, 2) coherence and 3) consensus with evangelicalism.

There was a trend in the faith of the participants experiencing a faith-transition. Unintentionally, prior to The Experience (maybe years, maybe months) participants began to recognize various incongruences between their own lived experience and widely accepted evangelical orthodoxy. The most common example of this centered on LGBQTI exclusion from

evangelical institutions. Exemplified in the ideology of IVCF discussed above, non-heterosexual forms of sexuality continue to be deemed “sinful” by mainstream evangelicalism.

In a 2016 position paper released by IVCF/USA entitled “A Theological Summary of Human Sexuality,” the organization articulates widespread evangelical thinking, insisting that “Scripture is very clear that God’s intention for sexual expression is to be between a husband and wife in marriage. Every other sexual practice is outside of God’s plan and therefore is a distortion of God’s loving design for humanity.”<sup>30</sup>

The message is explicit: non-heterosexual expressions of sexuality are perversions of a God-ordained natural order, and therefore, sinful. This is typical of most evangelical organizations.<sup>31</sup> Many of the participants, despite their evangelical history, had arrived at a contrary understanding of human sexuality. As several described within the comment threads, when friends or family self-identified as non-heterosexual, the long-standing evangelical doctrine of human sexuality was tested against real life.

Participants admitted that they could no longer assume that people they knew and loved were “sinners” because of their sexual identity. Someone who is gay or bi-sexual, is not less the person they had always known. The family member or friend simply loved and expressed their sexuality in a non-heterosexual way. Many participants confessed they knew their loved ones weren’t bad or deviant. They were simply non-heterosexual. It was the participant’s proximity to minority sexualities, whereby several participants admitted they knew the evangelical doctrine

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<sup>30</sup> “A Theological Summary of Human Sexuality: An InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA Position Paper,” Scribd, accessed April 8, 2017, <https://www.scribd.com/document/326684433/InterVarsity-Christian-Fellowship-Theology-of-Human-Sexuality-Paper>.

<sup>31</sup> Although the position of this project is vehemently opposed to the IVCF position on human sexuality, their explicit clarity on their position is admirable. Many evangelical organizations avoid such a definitive statement attempting to avoid controversy, while practicing an implicit discrimination.

didn't reflect reality. Evangelicalism's view of human sexuality lacked correspondence with what many experienced in the world.

Although, human sexuality is just one example of broken correspondence within evangelicalism, it became clear that it wasn't the only one.<sup>32</sup> And much like a child's tower built out of blocks, when one block is removed the consequence becomes a tumbling of the whole. A break in correspondence becomes a break in what Pannenberg refers to as 'the unity of truth.'<sup>33</sup> This collapsing of truth was demonstrated in several participant's faith shift experience.

Continuing to draw from evangelicalism's perspective of human sexuality demonstrated in the position paper of IVCF, in recognizing the break in correspondence participants began to raise questions of coherence. When participant's corresponding experience with non-heterosexual sexualities is different than the dogma of evangelicalism, inevitable questions emerge as to the truthfulness of the assumptions informing the tradition's dogma on sexuality. For evangelicalism, the dogma of a literal biblical hermeneutic is foundational. This is exemplified clearly in the IVCF position paper when it states; "*Scripture is very clear* that God's intention for sexual expression is..."<sup>34</sup>

The evangelical understanding of human sexuality represented by IVCF, including the view that non-heterosexual expression is a "perversion," is derived directly of the tradition's priority on a literal hermeneutic of Christian scripture. Consequently, when one experiences a lack of correspondence between human sexuality and the tradition's teaching, the theory of cognitive dissonance insists, that that person will seek to create greater unity between the

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the biggest breaks in correspondence for participants can be summarized as hell ("as a parent I could never torture my child, so how could God damn anyone for eternity"), homosexuality and hermeneutics (a literal inerrant hermeneutic of the bible doesn't reflect reality).

<sup>33</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> "A Theological Summary of Human Sexuality."

competing cognitions. One option is to deny one's own experience, opting for the consensus of the tradition. The other option, is questioning the tradition, including the foundational beliefs that created the dogma. In the example of human sexuality, if one experiences alternative sexuality as good, healthy or at the very least 'non-destructive/sinful,' one will be far more likely to question evangelicalism's foundational dogma of scriptural literalism.

If the reason given for why alternative sexuality is 'bad' is because "it is what scripture says," then another way of reconciling one's own experience of alternative sexuality with scripture, is to alter what one believes scripture is teaching or even the primacy of scripture itself. This begins the process of reestablishing coherence within one's epistemological understanding. Coherence requires that either the evangelical understanding of human sexuality originating from a literal hermeneutic of scripture is accurate and therefore one's experience of alternative sexuality is flawed *or* one's experience of alternative sexuality is accurate and therefore the literal hermeneutic of scripture is flawed. Many of the participants articulated the desire for the latter option. As one participant commented:

This is what keeps my faith strong - it is related to the supernatural rather than words in a book. *I cannot back it up with anything but personal experience and a gut feeling.* I can say that the one scripture that I have always felt connects with my situation is this. Psalm 124:7; "Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped.<sup>35</sup>

As this quote articulates, the participant is not prepared to disqualify their "personal experience." Therefore, this participant appears to have taken a different posture toward the scripture. Rather than adopting the NAE/LifeWay approach described in the first chapter's *Definition of Terms* where "The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe," this participant and others alike, represent those who see the need to reimagine what the Bible can be, so that reading it has

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<sup>35</sup> Comment on Plan B Page, Facebook, February 25, 2017.

coherence with lived experience. In the breaking of correspondence with the evangelical understanding of human sexuality, several participants became motivated to reconcile their understanding of human sexuality with their understanding of Scripture. The objective being, creating a coherence between these two understandings, minimizing cognitive dissonance.

Many of the participants had experienced a very real correspondence gap and were subsequently searching for greater coherence. What followed was the inevitable implication for their relationship to evangelicalism. When a tradition is defined explicitly (if not exclusively) by its beliefs/opinions, an affiliate who no longer fits the constraints of those beliefs, is required to evaluate their association to the group (or the group evaluates its association with the affiliate). At this point, an affiliate either acknowledges their understandings are no longer congruent with the tradition's beliefs, thereby placing themselves outside the group, or, they conceal and suppress their doubts and disagreements to publicly maintain the group's consensus. If the affiliate reveals their doubts about the group's consensus, or if the group exposes the affiliate as thinking beyond the parameters of consensus, it marks the beginning of 'the end' phase and a transition has commenced.

Based on the survey data above, it is the conclusion of this project that several participants had unaffiliated with evangelicalism for reasons of incoherence, while others remained affiliated, weighing the social, emotional and spiritual cost of expressing their sense of doubt and cognitive dissonance, and putting themselves at risk of excommunication. The latter seemed to generate an expressed anxiety with several participants.

### The Process of Transition

Nothing in the world is stagnant. The universe is a constant process of change and becoming. The human body is always growing, decaying, regenerating, digesting, and

metabolizing. The earth is in endless orbit, water is evaporating, clouds are forming and rain is falling. Seasons come and go and as Heraclitus famously observed, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.” Change and becoming is the reality of the universe.

As participants in The Experience understood, faith is not exempt from this changing reality. When one who has historically self-identified with evangelicalism experiences a rupture of correspondence, and a deficiency of coherence within the ideology, they may either break consensus or suppress their doubt to maintain consensus and remain within the group. If consensus is broken, a significant and life altering process begins for the transitioning evangelical. Transition expert, William Bridges sees this as being far more significant than merely a life-change. He explains:

But transition is very different from change. Change is situational: the reduction in the work force, the shift in the strategy, and the switch in reporting relationships are all “changes.” Transition, on the other hand, is a three-phase psychological reorientation process that people go through when they are coming to terms with change. It begins with an ending—with people letting go of their old reality and their old identity...

After the ending, people go into the second phase of transition, the neutral zone. This is a no-man’s land where people are (in Matthew Arnold’s graphic image) “Wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born...” Only after going through each of these first two phases of transition can people deal successfully with the third phase: beginning over again, with new energy, a new sense of purpose, a new outlook, and a new image of themselves.<sup>36</sup>

Here, Bridges describes a three-stage pattern of transition consisting of 1) The End Stage, 2) The Neutral Zone and 3) New Beginning. This transition process was clearly observed amongst the participants.

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<sup>36</sup> William Bridges, “Getting Them Through the Wilderness,” William Bridges & Associates (website), published 2006, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://wmbridges.com/featured/articles/getting-them-through-wilderness>.

### 1) The End Stage

This first stage of transition was the greatest barrier for participants to cross. Robert for example, was not prepared to end his many integrated connections to evangelicalism. Regardless of his own sense of cognitive dissonance with the tradition, he was not in a place to widely (beyond The Experience) break evangelical consensus. Robert was avoiding or delaying the trauma of a transitional ‘end,’ by remaining within evangelicalisms ideological boundaries. Bridges provides helpful insight into the intimidating reality of ‘the end stage’ when he writes, “For one person, an ending may be an event; for another, it may be a state of mind.” He goes on to explain that this is not insignificant, rather, “Endings are, let’s remember, experiences of *dying*. They are ordeals, and sometimes they challenge so basically our sense of who we are that we believe they will be the end of *us*.<sup>37</sup> This helps to illustrate the hesitation participants felt in leaving their churches or disassociating from evangelicalism. Such an ending requires making a decision that can shake one’s existential core.

For Robert and other participants like him, leaving evangelicalism posed a formidable risk. It would mean leaving behind the community which provided belongingness. It would mean abandoning well-worn routines and rituals. It would mean vacating volunteer jobs they had invested greatly in. It would mean leaving the very context that gave religious and social identity. What would replace this? Who would replace this?

Referring to participant data, this may partially explain why 78% of participants remain affiliated to churches in which they don’t feel they can be honest about their beliefs. It is safer to stay in the bondage of cognitive dissonance than step into the wilderness of unknowing. In this sense, Bridges likens the process of transition to the Exodus narrative of the Hebrew Bible. ‘The

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<sup>37</sup> William Bridges, *Transitions: Making sense of Life’s Changes*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 131.

'end stage' corresponds to the Hebrew's leaving Egypt.<sup>38</sup> The end is where everything changes and there is no turning back. It is evacuating (or being evacuated), beyond a familiar reality (even if it is not a pleasant one).

Consequently, Robert is most accurately described as an evangelical with theological angst, rather than one who has embraced the transition beyond the tradition. That is not to say Robert is not moving closer to an 'end stage,' just that he is managing to exist uncomfortably within evangelicalism, much like the Hebrew people lived uncomfortably within Egypt for generations. The bondage of Egypt could never feel like home, yet the Hebrew people were not yet prepared to make a run for the Sea.

Jonathan and Mary, in contrast had broken consensus and embraced 'the end stage.' Leading them into the most daunting stage of any transition, 'the neutral zone' or 'the wilderness.'

## 2) The Neutral Zone

As Moses led the Hebrew people out of their bondage in Egypt, there were forty years of wandering, uncertainty and unsettledness. The transition was not from bondage to The Promised Land. Rather, The Promised Land could only be accessed through an extended "season" of wandering. Bridges, referring to this time as 'the neutral zone,' sees it as a necessary stage for all significant transition.<sup>39</sup> Marilyn Ferguson captures the essence of the neutral zone well as she's quoted by Bridges:

It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear... It's like being in between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Bridges, "Getting Them Through the Wilderness." "sec. The Cost of Not Managing Transition."

<sup>39</sup> Bridges, *Transitions*. 131.

<sup>40</sup> William Bridges, *The Way of Transition* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 155.

The neutral zone can be a terrifying place. It is not the old thing nor is it the new. In fact, Exodus 16:3 records the Israelites complaining while in the wilderness: “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt!” Sometimes death or enslavement can feel like a better option than the unknowing of the wilderness.

It is the wilderness/neutral zone that best described Jonathan’s place within The Experience. Finding himself now beyond evangelicalism there was an uncertainty of what to do, who to connect with and where to find a new consensus to settle. This was evidenced in the repeated discussions amongst participants about finding churches where they could start over. Those who had exited evangelicalism weren’t necessarily “done” with church, just conservative evangelicalism. In fact, when asked “if you were to leave the church you are currently associated with, would you begin looking for a new church, 53% responded “yes,” 33% responded “I’m not sure” and only 13% responded with a definitive “no.” It seems that the isolation and unknowing of the neutral zone for both those within it and those contemplating stepping into it (Robert), is an uncomfortable and terrifying space to be in.

When considering leaving evangelicalism there are many factors that one must weigh. There were a few dialogues within The Experience where participants discussed a desire to leave their evangelical church, yet repeatedly hesitated, because of the cost (socially, emotionally, relationally, or financially for those in full-time vocational ministry). Aware of what they would be stepping away from, there remained significant ambiguity and uncertainty as to what they would be stepping into. Shaken from their former worldview, isolated from many past relationships and often asking large existential questions, the neutral zone can be a sustained place of trauma and disorientation.

The Experience, in its desire to be a temporary space of refuge, relationship and reflection gave participants a glimpse of what a community beyond evangelicalism could be. What The Experience sought to provide was not a new beginning, but a space where those in the neutral zone or contemplating ending their affiliation with evangelicalism could connect with others in a similar space and discover they were not alone. Their trepidation of the neutral zone was a common and legitimate one.

There were other participants for whom leaving the group was not their choice. Rather, while raising questions of coherence related to evangelical doctrine, their questioning had resulted in banishment from their evangelical community. This was exemplified in the painful experience of one participant who had been born into a family deeply committed to the spread of evangelicalism and who had committed his life and his family's life to that same cause. However, upon raising questions related to deeply entrenched evangelical doctrine, an 'end' was forced upon him hurling him into a neutral zone not of his making.

This is consistent with research done by Sonya Roccas and Andrey Elster in their study of group identities. They note: "Outgroup members are all equally excluded from the "realm of civilization," perceived as barbarians, demonized, and treated as enemy combatants that can be destroyed to protect the ingroup."<sup>41</sup> In this sense, evangelicalism is able to quickly isolate any voice of doctrinal descent as "heresy", and exclude to protect the group. In a similar study, evolutionary theorists Mark Leary and Catherine Cottrell argue that people evolved "to selectively exclude people from groups and to cope with social exclusion. Far from being a random event, Leary and Cottrell suggest that social exclusion is used systematically to enhance

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<sup>41</sup> Sonya Roccas and Andrey Elster, "Group Identities" in *The Oxford Handbook of Intergroup Conflict*, ed. Linda R. Tropp, The Oxford Handbook Online, November 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199747672.013.0007>. "sec. Identification and Conflict."

survival and reproductive goals.”<sup>42</sup> This suggests that evangelicalism as a group strictly defined by its beliefs, functions in a way which excludes those who challenge its beliefs. It will turn on those within the group if they pose a threat to the doctrinal core which provides for the existence of the group. Consequently, there are some that choose to leave evangelicalism and step into the neutral zone for reasons of coherence and their own intellectual integrity. There are others who may not choose to leave, but are forced out when the group discovers theological or ideological descent. From here, the neutral zone is inevitable.

Yet, according to Bridges’ transitional theory, the difficult space of a neutral zone, does not last indefinitely. For what emerges from this experience of wilderness, is a new beginning.

### *3) A New Beginning*

The Third and final stage of transition, identified by Bridges, emerges when one begins to discover and live into a new thing. This is where one begins to regain their sense of stability and grounding which remained elusive within the neutral zone. This final stage ushers in a new normal, one unique from what preceded the end stage. Based on the comments and interaction within The Experience, Mary best exemplified this stage. She had made the decisive break with evangelicalism and went through a season of ‘wilderness.’ Mary was now resettled in a new faith community which had much better congruence with her own beliefs and ideals.

Within The Experience, Mary took on a key role of encouraging and ‘pastoring’ others. Whereas, many within the other two stages still felt a measure of resentment and woundedness, Mary had emerged beyond that. The dialogue of participants within the end stage seemed to simmer with frustration and worry, both for what evangelicalism is and what they would lose in

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<sup>42</sup> C. Nathan DeWall, “Emerging Perspectives on the Study of Social Exclusion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Exclusion*, ed. C. Nathan DeWall, The Oxford Handbook Online, April 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195398700.013.0001>. “sec. Introduction.”

leaving it. The sentiment of those within the neutral zone seemed to exude confusion and uncertainty. Mary, alternatively, interacted with a confidence and security related to both where she was and where she had come from. She was through the process and settled on the other side.

Providing a ‘new beginning’ for participants was not the goal of this project. However, one could foresee that there is not one single uniform new beginning for those exiting evangelicalism. Mary had settled into a new faith community, but that is not to say others who come into a new beginning will proceed in the same way. The final stage of transition may take a multiplicity of forms based on the personality and experience of each participant. As evangelicalism tends to enact strict moral and theological boundaries ensuring conformity, the participants exhibited various new faith beginnings. For example, one participant leaned heavily on aspects of continental philosophy to make sense of the world. Others, were compelled by contemplation and mysticism. Others were driven by social justice and ecology. Where evangelicalism had placed a dogma at the core, many of the participants were in the early stages of replacing this core with a more coherent theology and worldview that represented their understanding of reality.

It is the hypothesis of this project that when participants allow themselves to journey through the wilderness of the neutral zone, they will eventually emerge into a new beginning that fits their vocation and calling. Each new beginning will be unique and specific to the individual.

### Belongingness Theory

Belongingness theory is a helpful companion to understanding how the epistemological crisis and Bridges’ transition theory impact those leaving (or thinking of leaving) evangelicalism. Belongingness theory helps to illustrate why leaving evangelicalism is never a matter of theology alone. It illuminates both how the evangelical epistemological crisis often leads to an existential

crisis, and why so many within evangelicalism hesitate to disassociate despite their cognitive dissonance.

According to a research study by Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, human beings are:

...naturally driven toward establishing and sustaining belongingness. The need to belong should therefore be found to some degree in all humans in all cultures, although naturally one would expect there to be individual differences in strength and intensity, as well as cultural and individual variations in how people express and satisfy the need. But it should prove difficult or impossible for culture to eradicate the need to belong (except perhaps for an occasional, seriously warped individual).<sup>43</sup>

In this regard, belongingness theory elevates the human need for affiliation as a primal need, beyond emotional predispositions. Belonging theory provides greater insight into the complex emotional anxiety and trauma that is often encountered by those nearing the end of their evangelical association. According to the participant survey conducted prior to The Experience, 46% of those who responded had been involved in their church for ten or more years and only 13% said they wouldn't be interested in seeking out a new church if they left their current one. This supports the premise of belongingness theory, in suggesting that one's decision to end a relational affiliation has significant psychological consequences. Beaumeister and Leary explain:

The main emotional implication of the belongingness hypothesis is that real, potential, or imagined changes in one's belongingness status will produce emotional responses, with positive affect linked to increases in belongingness and negative affect linked to decreases in it... Threats to social attachments, especially the dissolution of social bonds, are a primary source of negative affect. People feel anxious at the prospect of losing important relationships, feel depressed or grief stricken when their connections with certain other people are severed, and feel lonely when they lack important.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (May 1995): 499.

<sup>44</sup> Baumeister and Leary, 505.

For someone to leave evangelicalism, is not simply a theological / cognitive expression, but has serious psychological and emotional consequences. It is the ‘abandonment of’ or ‘excommunication from’ a place of belonging, when a new one has not been established.

This insight provides greater clarity for the elation experienced by someone like Mary who has come through the neutral zone and established a new beginning. Baumeister and Leary again observe:

...the need to belong can, in principle, be directed toward any other human being, and the loss of relationship with one person can to some extent be replaced by any other. The main obstacle to such substitution is that formation of new relationships takes time, such as in the gradual accumulation of intimacy and shared experience.<sup>45</sup>

This reality suggests that once a person begins to build new affiliations and develops new relationships (or finds a new *consensus*), the trauma of no longer belonging, previously experienced in the end stage and through the neutral zone is replaced with a new acceptance, belonging and relational foundation. The existential crisis is replaced by a new hope. It is from this new place of belongingness that one experiences a fresh beginning.

#### *Belongingness Within a New Consensus*

Evangelicalism is a group defined by its precise beliefs pertaining to articulable doctrinal propositions. For most participants, theological inquiry beyond evangelicalism’s boundaries has been a minefield of criticism and a ‘cloak and dagger’ routine of protecting their secret doubts and disagreements from evangelicalism’s establishment. Consequently, when participants began to see The Experience as an opportunity to safely express their thinking ‘out loud,’ they quickly gravitated to affirming one another’s comments and ideas. Especially when they were contrary to evangelical orthodoxy. However, outside of The Experience, many participants were unwilling

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<sup>45</sup> Baumeister and Leary, 500.

to articulate the kind of things they wanted to talk about. Their belongingness within evangelicalism, required strict adherence to the group's consensus. To explore Christianity beyond the well documented statements of faith, was to risk expulsion and social repercussions.

The Experience, however, began with very limited structure or expectation for consensus. Participants were encouraged to explore and build a reflective and collaborative framework together for dialogue. This became organic and generative for the participants. The Experience intentionally rejected the establishing of a statement of faith or consensus, that needed to be defended or protected. There was never a coercive threat of expulsion by or of anyone from the group. Rather, as participants began to explore together, affirmation and consensus began to emerge. The invitation to explore openly, led to a voluntary consensus, rather than a coercive one. As noted by renowned theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg:

Religious coercion is an attempt to force consensus about the truth of dogma and in this way to establish the truth itself. Consensus, it is thought, can serve as a mark of truth because of the universality of truth expresses itself in agreement of judgement. The agreement is then to be forcibly achieved by religious coercion. Yet only a consensus that arises free from any coercion can be advanced as a criterion of truth.<sup>46</sup>

Within The Experience, there was no theological starting point or boundary. Unlike most evangelical organizations, there was no doctrinal statement limiting the parameters of discussion before the discussion occurred. Instead, The Experience had a purposeful statement of engagement, setting the tone for how discussion and discovery should happen.<sup>47</sup> It could be said that the appeal of The Experience was not the parameters limiting theological imagination but the statement of engagement that invited all participants into a cooperative space of discovery.

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<sup>46</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> To better understand the vision for The Experience shared with Participants, see Appendix B.

### St. Paul As an Archetype of Faith Transition

This section has attempted to give greater interpretation and analysis of what occurred within the participants during The Experience. From the epistemological crisis, to the stages of transition and into the loss and search for belonging, when one's faith transitions, it is a significant life event. Attention will now be given to St. Paul as a biblical archetype of the existential phenomenon which occurs during a major faith transition.

The Apostle Paul himself, describes the complexity and intensity of his faith transition in Philippians 3:4-8 as he writes:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

But *whatever were gains to me* I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake *I have lost all things.*<sup>48</sup> (emphasis added)

What Paul describes here is the sheer depth a faith transition had on his being. He articulates how his entire understanding of self, was immersed in the former religion. And in reflection, he categorizes *the gains* his former faith affiliation afforded him compared to how the transition was an experience of losing 'all things.' Paul describes his faith transition impacting the most significant parts of his life. There is a parallel experience for many who are leaving evangelicalism.

Paul describes how his entire understanding of self, had been immersed in and defined by the former religion. This immersion included more than mere intellect or any mental construct of God. Rather, Paul reveals even his body bears the marks of his previous faith (circumcision). His former religion gave him a defining sense of belongingness and tribal identity (Israel and

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<sup>48</sup> All scripture quoted is from the New International Version (NIV).

Benjamin). The former religion gave him language (Hebrew). The former religion gave him a role and purpose in the world, for which he could feel of value (persecution of Christians). The former faith gave him a well-defined ethical framework (Torah).

Paul acknowledges the benefit these things were to him. They were to his ‘gain.’ His former faith gave his life and world definition, meaning, structure, purpose and belongingness. It was only in his faith transition, that he experiences a complete rupture and loss of it all. Paul confesses this faith transition costs him everything. It is a similar rupture and loss that happens in those leaving evangelicalism. This is seen in the following ways:

### *The Body*

Just as Paul’s body bore the mark of his former religion in circumcision, so too, does evangelicalism get worn on the body. For many, essential to evangelicalism is a body marked by heterosexual conformity. Evangelicalism can be a sexually repressive tradition, strictly defined by what one must not do with their body.

For many evangelicals, there has been an “I kissed dating goodbye” approach to sexuality.<sup>49</sup> Purity culture and its explicit guilt inducing trauma toward any form of sexual curiosity or exploration, has saddled many with sexual guilt and shame. With a faith transition comes the potential for healthy sexual discovery without shame or coercion. If evangelicalism has marked bodies with sexual shame, a transition beyond evangelicalism can bring a healthy sense of self and love.

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<sup>49</sup> “I kissed dating goodbye” is an evangelical cultural idiom. It refers to the best-selling book by that title, written by Joshua Harris, advocating for Christian purity culture. Harris has since admitted that his book has caused harm to some people and is rethinking his position. More can be read here: [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2016/08/i\\_kissed\\_dating\\_goodbye\\_author\\_is\\_maybe\\_kind\\_of\\_sorry.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2016/08/i_kissed_dating_goodbye_author_is_maybe_kind_of_sorry.html).

## *Identity*

Paul's former religion gave him a tribal identity. Just as Paul self-identified as belonging to Israel and more specifically to the Tribe of Benjamin, so too, evangelicalism provides a deep tribal belonging for its members. If Paul's identity in the Tribe of Benjamin can be described as a 'birth rite', belonging within evangelicalism should be described as a 'belief rite.' By simply assenting and agreeing to certain doctrinal assertions,<sup>50</sup> one is identified as a member of the evangelical tribe.

Although Paul's former identification with the Tribe of Benjamin, would have been a more primitive tribal association, such identification is no less significant today. As the research of Robert Hogan, Robert B. Kaiser and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic indicates:

Our evolutionary history as group-living animals suggests that normal adults need what their tribes historically provided over the millennia but society today may not necessarily provide. Based on what we know about human evolution, socio-analytic theory argues that, at a deep, unconscious level, people are motivated by three broad categories of needs: (1) People need companionship, acceptance, and approval, and they find criticism and rejection—as implied by concept of separation—to be highly stressful; (2) people need power, status, and the control of resources, and they find the loss of power, status, and control—as implied by concept of competence—to be highly stressful; and (3) people need structure, meaning, and purpose in their lives and find the loss of structure and purpose—as implied by concept of *anomie*—to be highly stressful.<sup>51</sup>

This research reveals that tribal identity and belonging remains essential to an individual's psychological well-being. Predictably, several participants felt the isolation as evangelicalism shunned them for holding non-conformist beliefs. Other participants, prophetically rejected

<sup>50</sup> Although there is not universal agreement from one evangelical community to the next on what exactly these 'beliefs' must be, they generally orbit around things like the fallen/sinful nature of humanity, an inerrant/literalist hermeneutic, the necessary surrogacy of Christ's death for the forgiveness of sin, the eternal consequence of accepting/rejecting the evangelical faith.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Hogan, Robert B. Kaiser and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, "An Evolutionary View of Organizational Culture" in *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Climate and Culture*, eds. Benjamin Schneider and Karen M. Barbera, The Oxford Handbooks Online, August 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199860715.013.0028>. "sec. Implications."

evangelicalism on their own accord, opting to distance themselves from its perceived narrow-mindedness. Whether by choice or by exclusion, participants felt the loss of their tribe much like Paul did.

The reality of the participant's tribal loss surfaced not through theological discourse, but in their emotive engagement with creative responses. What also emerged, was the expressed desire to reimagine "tribe" as something far more inclusive and expansive. The kind of tribe and belonging the participants often referred to included sexual minorities, other faiths and even the evangelicals who had ex-communicated them. This made many prime candidates for a new tribal order. Their former tribe no longer defined them. St. Paul describes his vision for a new identity beyond tribalism in Galatians 3:38 where he imagines "*there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" This is a tribe not defined along religious or social or economic lines; rather, it is a tribe of ultimate inclusivity, where tribalism itself ceases and Christ defines. This is the kind of tribal identity the participants regularly expressed desire for in the discussions.

### *Language*

Paul spoke the language of his ethnic and religious tribe, Hebrew. Every religion has its own use of language. When attention is paid, a religion's use of language reveals some of the deepest (often unspoken) beliefs. For example, evangelicalism demonstrates its innate 'in group' / 'out group' dualism, in its description of people as "saved" vs. "lost" or "born again" vs. "sinner." Similarly, one can discern divine-determinism when the evangelical response to the suffering of another is "there but by the grace of God, go I." The implication of course, is that God's grace kept one from suffering but that same grace wasn't extended to the other. Which

raises serious theological questions about why a loving God's grace would favor some over others.

Spontaneously and unrelated to any specific discussion thread, one participant posted about how she had always loved a song which included the lyrics, "in the morning, when I rise, give me Jesus." Yet, more recently, hearing Jesus spoken of in this way, sounded like "a commodification of Jesus." For her, this means of speaking of Jesus was equivalent to reducing him to a product to consume upon one's desire, much like a cup of coffee. Another participant whimsically commented, "where was Jesus the previous night anyway, that he has to be given in the morning?" The participants recognized the language of their former religion had limits. Language and descriptions of God which once sounded beautiful and gave faith meaning, were becoming shallow and even offensive. That which was once inspirational in the former religion lacked coherence and meaning in the transition. In fact, as one participant shared, even the word 'God' had become loaded with connotation she wasn't comfortable with. The very word 'God' was colonized and tainted from her previous evangelical experience. She expressed her own need to find a word which would describe the divine love "that hummed within her." Although she didn't yet have this new language, she was on a quest to find language to fit her experience.

### *Value & Meaning*

The Apostle Paul was fervent in his mandate to persecute the first century Christians. Even as the Christian scriptures describe his dramatic and sudden faith reframe ("conversion"), he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. For Saul (who would later become Paul), persecuting Christians gave him moral superiority as he stood against what he perceived to be a 'heretic' movement. His vocation in leading the anti-Christian movement, gave him status amongst his community. It provided him with direction and purpose. When he went through the

radical faith transition, he was no longer able to live out this mission which had defined so much of his identity. Instead, he had to rediscover himself (ultimately becoming an apostle to the church he persecuted). Paul had to acknowledge that the place he once found purpose and meaning, could no longer be that place. He lost his vocation and the thing that he did with such passion. This was all the result of a faith transition. What was experienced as an end, was in fact the beginning of something new. Only the ‘new’ must be accessed through the painful and disorienting ‘neutral zone.’<sup>52</sup> We want to rush the end. But as in Paul’s case, it took time, he had to go through the process of loss to discover the other side.

The loss of meaning for Paul was significant. However, in loosing purpose, he in fact, discovers a new purpose that emerges from the transition. Paul who lived to destroy and persecute the church, ultimately lives the rest of his life and is ultimately killed for giving his life to the well-being of the church. In his faith transition, his life was stripped of its meaning. Yet Paul emerges with an even greater passion and fervency to engage the Christian church rather than persecute it.

Paul provides an archetype for the kind of transition explored in The Experience. Where many participants had passionately given themselves to rigorous study of scripture, providing leadership for evangelical churches, involvement in para-church organizations that sought converts, raising children to be conservative evangelicals etc., those experiencing faith transitions were asking the important questions of purpose and meaning beyond evangelicalism. Participants expressed a sadness at times for how much time and energy they had invested in the things they no longer believed in. The things that once mattered the most, were now meaningless and at times even morally suspect. And for many, there was no immediate replacement in their

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<sup>52</sup> Perhaps this ‘neutral zone’ is represented in the biblical account when Paul loses his sight for three days (Acts 9:8). It was a period of disorientation, darkness and the inability to see what was coming.

emerging faith. If they were going to leave behind a coercive view of God, why then should they “convert” people. Saving souls from eternal damnation can feel so rewarding. Yet, where does that sense of reward come when you no longer believe in a coercive, retributive god one needs to be saved from? Participants had given up the need for the self-righteous posture that others need to become like them and instead would rather learn from those different than them. There can be an incredible loss of existential purpose in a faith transition. Paul described it in his letters, as did the discussion threads within The Experience.

### *Ethics*

Paul makes the claim in Philippians 3 that he is “faultless” according to the Torah. This is Paul’s way of saying he’s lived an ethical and blameless life as laid out by his former religious life. This is a very appealing and powerful claim that Paul makes. And it is one evangelicalism is very familiar with. In Paul’s previous religious life, the expectation of what makes one, ethical, moral and good is clear. It is defined by adherence to Torah. If one knows, follows and obeys the Jewish law, one is deemed righteous in the community and can feel good about themselves. By following the clearly defined rules of the faith, one can assess their life as good and moral.

It is only when Paul is thrust into a faith transition, that this ethical barometer is challenged. For example, he regularly talks about a righteousness defined not by the law, but in Christ (Philippians 3:9). He advocates for a religious ethic that doesn’t require the law’s demand of circumcision (Romans 4:11). He insists foods sacrificed to idols are ok to eat in some cases (1 Corinthians 8). Paul is consistently redefining ethics beyond the formula of his former religious tradition. Similarly, evangelicalism has its own ethical/moral code that when adherents submit to it, promises its own sanctification. And in many ways, it’s more seductive than Paul’s former religious identity. For morality within evangelicalism is not primarily defined by action at all, but

in doctrine. If one can affirm the right doctrinal concepts and speak the right words in prayer, they are deemed to be imparted with ‘the righteousness of Christ.’ Of course, there are some behavioral expectations, however, the good evangelical Christian is one who holds tribal consensus.<sup>53</sup> If one prays for forgiveness, attends church, and retains a literal hermeneutic of the scripture, that person is deemed a “good Christian.” One need not care for the vulnerable, be generous with their resources, welcome the refugee or advocate for non-human life, and still, a prayer and scripture reading is what qualifies one as “good”. With this framework of morality, evangelicals can truly believe themselves to be the most moral/ethical version of themselves, despite blatant greed, complacency, and indifference. Evangelicals are often convinced that even the most morally outstanding and spiritually woke human beings ultimately need what they have (i.e., an evangelical faith).<sup>54</sup>

Consequently, when a person begins to migrate away from their evangelical tradition, they can experience a sense of ‘loss’ in their own moral goodness.<sup>55</sup> In fact, this is often the impetus for questioning the faith in the first place. For example, when one gets to know a gay person who loves well, lives well and is committed to living justly, it is difficult to write them off as being evil. This breakdown of correspondence forces one to question their own foundational assumptions about ethics and seek out something more coherent.

If praying a prayer of forgiveness, reading the Bible and excluding gay people doesn’t make one ethical, the question emerges, what will? There is a profound sense of loss when a

<sup>53</sup> This has been evidenced in the dichotomy between the handling of celebrity pastor Mark Driscoll, who allegedly abused power and manipulated church resources for his own benefit, and Rob Bell, who suggested a more generous doctrine of hell. Evangelical criticism was far harsher on Bell who merely broke consensus, than on Driscoll who allegedly acted immorally.

<sup>54</sup> A great example of this is articulated by author Rob Bell in the opening to his book *Love Wins*. In it, he argues about how many evangelicals are convinced that Gandhi is condemned to eternal hell, because he wasn’t “Christian.” Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (HarperCollins Publishers: New York, 2011), 1.

<sup>55</sup> They can also experience the opposite in a sense of self-righteous pride over their former religion.

system's rules and formulas which have defined what is good, begins to fail. Post-evangelicals can be left wondering, what will become the "authoritative" guidance for living well. This came up in a comment thread of one participant. He was uncomfortable with the possible reframe of Scripture presented in The Experience. He wondered (out loud/in writing), if The Experience's posture toward scripture would undermine biblical authority, creating a slippery slope by which Christians would no longer have a moral compass.

When evangelicalism is transcended, and biblical literalism is no longer how ethics and morality are defined, one can feel a loss in their moral compass. Yet ironically, it is the moral compass that requires many to leave evangelicalism and biblical literalism behind. Thus, post-evangelicals are required to ask new questions of morality and righteousness, just as Paul continued to do after his faith transition.

Although, many who emerge beyond evangelicalism can often be skeptical of Paul (namely associated to what is attributed to him as it relates to the role of women and sexual minorities), in this light, Paul may become a patron saint of 'faith-transitioners.' He too, felt the existential weight of what was to be loosed and gained in breaking from a tradition.

### Analysis Summary

In the phenomenological observations above, it has been demonstrated that there is commonality within the participant's journey beyond evangelicalism. It is a journey which begins with a break in correspondence. Here, participants begin to observe that common evangelical doctrine, ethics, politics and/or practice, fail to correspond to their lived experience (i.e., LGBTQ exclusion and condemnation). Frequently, the breaks in correspondence lead to questions of coherence, as the ideological system responsible for the correspondence gap raises cognitive dissonance. By questioning sexual ethics based on a literalist interpretation of

scriptures, participants begin to question other realities that were previously assumed within a literalist approach. Now, a previously coherent ideology begins to reveal itself as less-than congruent. It is then that participants must decide whether to explore alternative theologies which present a more compelling coherence. When the latter option is chosen, it will frequently lead to a strain in relationship with evangelicalism. To break with the group's consensus will begin the transition process and an inevitable break in belongingness.

Just as there is a common experience for those disassociating from evangelicalism (entering 'the end stage'), this project hypothesized that there will be general similarities for those coming through the neutral zone, and into a 'new beginning.'

A new beginning is most likely to commence with a reoriented belongingness. Just as the 'end stage' was realized in the breakdown of evangelical belongingness, so too will the 'new beginning' be marked by a renewed belongingness. This new belongingness may also be described as a new consensus. It's an experience in which one becomes associated to others with values and perspectives that have greater resonance to the post-evangelical. Many of the participants found a 'distant' sense of belonging in writers and podcasters, who could articulate their experience of evangelical incoherence. Knowing that there were others who felt the same cognitive dissonance with evangelicalism, gave many participants a sense of comfort and belonging that they were not alone. The Experience with its expressed mandate to be a space of refuge, reflection and *relationship*, was another step toward establishing a post-evangelical belongingness for those who needed it.

Once the primal need for belongingness is reestablished, the hypothesis of this project is that there will be a renewed inspiration to explore concepts and ideas that will lead to greater

theological coherence. When embraced with belongingness, the individual has a greater capacity for exploration and understanding.

The final stage to be achieved in this new post-evangelical beginning is a new correspondence. However, this new correspondence will look radically different for most post-evangelicals than the correspondence they experienced within evangelicalism. If evangelicalism insisted on an exclusive way to see, understand and relate to the world, a post-evangelical correspondence comprehends and appreciates a multiplicity of perspectives. Consequently, the post-evangelical is often one who finds belongingness within a plurality of ideas, perspectives and epistemological understandings.

## Chapter Five: Implications for Ministry

William Bridges develops an Exodus metaphor for the process of transition. Every transition involves three stages consisting of 1) an end, 2) a neutral zone and 3) a new beginning. He sees these stages corresponding to the Exodus story in 1) leaving Egypt, 2) wandering in the wilderness and 3) entering the Promised Land.<sup>56</sup> For many of the participants, their experience in evangelicalism represents a metaphorical Egypt. For those still affiliated with evangelicalism, there can be a sense of feeling trapped. To leave evangelicalism, often means leaving friendships, giving up opportunities to serve and contribute, it means defying all the coercive imagery and doctrines of God and stepping into an uncertain wilderness. Much like the Hebrew people were in bondage within Egypt, many can feel stuck within evangelicalism, seeing no option but to remain confined or leave Christianity all together.

Consequently, viable and safe “neutral zones” are essential for those seeking a faith beyond evangelicalism. The Experience was an attempt to create a safer wilderness-like neutral zone for participants to step into with others. Just as the Hebrew Bible tells of how Moses led the entire Hebrew people through forty years of wilderness, so too will those leaving evangelicalism benefit from both leadership through the next phase and fellow sojourners on the journey. In this chapter, the project will explore what a group focused on journeying through the wilderness/neutral zone post-evangelicalism might look like.

### Beyond the Bible

If evangelicalism is defined by strict adherence to a literal biblical hermeneutic (authority of scripture), then the neutral zone must emphasize other important aspects of a coherent faith. This will include things like science, philosophy, economics, anthropology, art, and ecology. In

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<sup>56</sup> Bridges, “Getting Them Through the Wilderness.” “sec. The Cost of Not Managing Transition.”

understanding the world beyond the narrow metaphysic portrayed in biblical literalism, sojourners can begin to see how other disciplines can inform a coherent faith, rather than threaten stagnate dogma.<sup>57</sup>

Practical Step: facilitate learning environments that cover a multiplicity of subjects and perspectives. Where evangelicalism tends to create a “right vs. wrong” view of ‘biblical truth,’ a healthy neutral zone can allow Christians to explore the world they are a part of in the ways that interest them.

### Beyond Border Protection

Evangelicalism explicitly defines its borders by its theological belief. Neutral zones, will put no priority on doctrinal statements or theological uniformity, and will instead focus on acts of justice, kindness and love. Rather than a unity based on abstract statements *about* God, neutral zones will be communities willing to enact the radical love *of* God. They will be less about sustaining budgets and buildings and more about activities of kindness and justice.

Essential for neutral zones, will be the ability to transcend a ‘boarder-mentality’ of evangelicalism. Practicing a radical hospitality and inclusion in which all voices are welcome and heard. Spaces will be created where people are free and empowered to find their own voice and even push back against unhealthy expectations.

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<sup>57</sup> According to a study published May 15, 2017, by Gallup, the number of Americans who believe the Bible is the “literal word of God” has decreased from 38% in 1976 to 24% in 2017. The study summary observes: “Over the past three decades, Americans’ view of the Bible as the literal word of God has been declining, while their view that the Bible is a collection of fables, myths and history recorded by man has been increasing. The shift is most pronounced among young adults, indicating the trend is likely to accelerate in the years ahead.” Lydia Saad, “Record Few Americans Believe Bible is Literal Word of God,” Gallup, May 15, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/210704/record-few-americans-believe-bible-literal-word-god.aspx>.

### Practical Steps:

- Don't hesitate to say things that would be scandalous within evangelicalism. Tastefully, model the freedom of questioning, doubting and exploring without fear of Divine retribution.
- Mobilize the group into action. Allow people to pursue their own callings toward justice and love beyond church sanctioned programs.
- Allow minority voices to lead, critique and construct.

### Leadership

Those leaving evangelicalism will benefit from wise and patient leadership. Since the neutral zone is the time and space between what once was and what is to come, those finding themselves in the neutral zone will follow capable leaders able to relate to the space, offering wisdom amidst the instability. Just as the wilderness-wandering Hebrews reminisced and even longed to return to Egypt, so too will those leaving evangelicalism need reminding of the potentially coercive bondage they are fleeing.

The neutral zone is not a fun space to stay in. Since evangelicalism's subtle message is often of a God whom rescues and blesses those who are faithful, those who have left evangelicalism may mistake the discomfort and isolation of leaving for Divine judgment or a miss-step of faith. Consistent pastoral leadership where people in the neutral zone can be reminded that uncertainty is expected and healthy can be "good news." This leadership will consist of listening, asking strategic and probing questions, it will involve spiritual-formation that dispels myths of "ease and prosperity" in the spiritual life. Spiritual leadership in this space is the ability to walk with others in their emerging theological formation and construction allowing them space to discover. This will require leaders to resist the colonizing urge of superimposing their post-evangelical ideology as the definitive option. Instead the leader will

walk alongside others helping them discern the nuance and beauty of a fresh faith that emerges from the person and their experience.

**Practical Step:** The leader must have a general knowledge of alternative theological approaches (e.g., open theism, process theology, feminist theology, womanist theology, post-colonial theology).

### Beyond Evangelism

There is no need to evangelize evangelicals into post-evangelicalism. As explored in section one of this project, there is a significant North American trend away from evangelical affiliation. This means communities or organizations that want to connect with post-evangelicals don't need to coax people away from evangelicalism. Instead, communities sympathetic to those in a faith transition will seek ways to be present for individuals as the need is felt. As movement guru and leadership specialist Seth Godin articulates in a famous TED Talk:

The Beatles did not invent teenagers, they merely decided to lead them. Most movements... most leadership that we're doing is about finding a group that's disconnected, but already has a yearning. Not persuading people to want something, they don't have yet.<sup>58</sup>

Godin's principle here directly applies to communities formed by or for or that include post-evangelicals. Where marketing is about creating a yearning within someone, leading post-evangelicals will be about giving momentum and direction to an already existing yearning for cognitive congruence. There is no need to promise the world or offer a solution to a problem. Rather, authentic faith-transition leadership will consist of validating the yearnings for what lies beyond evangelicisms and provide space for individual expressions to take form.

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<sup>58</sup> Seth Godin, "The Tribes We Lead," Filmed February 2009 at TED2009, TED video, 17:29, [https://www.ted.com/talks/seth\\_godin\\_on\\_the\\_tribes\\_we\\_lead](https://www.ted.com/talks/seth_godin_on_the_tribes_we_lead).

Practical Step: The data reveals there is a growing number of people moving away from evangelical association. Leaders don't need to convince anyone that a faith-transition is necessary. Rather, by creating a welcoming space for those experiencing faith-transitions such communities are likely to gain momentum.

### Space for Crisis

Allow space for the existential crisis. Philosopher Peter Rollins has suggested that churches often function like crack houses.<sup>59</sup> The crack house is where one goes when looking for a fix or a magic solution to escape problems. In entering a crack house one takes the drugs and their problems disappear. Only they don't, Rollins insists. Rather, when the high is over, when the drugs have worn off, the problems are still there and the pain is just as real. Similarly, churches often offer people escape from their doubts, pain and fear of wilderness-like experiences in life. By offering a weekly shot of certainty, triumphalism and assurance that God is going to fix everything, churches routinely offer escape from the pain and reality of doubt.

Churches that are connecting with those experiencing a faith-transition will not seek to provide the temporary escape or avoidance of life's pain or the existential crisis that often comes with faith-transition. Rather, Rollin's suggests, a church should be like a good singer-songwriter. For the singer-songwriter doesn't seek to distance one from their pain, rather they invite one to experience the depth and reality of that pain through the songs they sing. For it is in experiencing the pain, that one can journey through it and come out the other side.

Practical Step: Communities seeking to give space for faith-transition will openly discuss and make space for the existential crisis. Rather than filling space with songs about how Jesus

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Rollins, "Crack House Church," The Work of the People, accessed May 6, 2017, <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/crack-house-church>.

makes everything better, or teaching how Christianity is a system of certainty, these communities will allow the pain of life and faith-transition to be spoken and engaged. Stories will be shared of the struggles that are experienced and the relationships that are impacted when one moves beyond evangelicalism. These communities will be like the singer-songwriters that articulate the painful reality of the end stage and the neutral zone.

## **Chapter Six: A Neutral Zone Church: Case Study**

### **Central Avenue Church, Glendale California**

This project has sought to highlight the primacy of belongingness for human well-being.

Whenever there is the loss of meaningful relationship (as is often experienced in a faith-transition), there is a correlated negative psychological affect. As Baumeister and Leary observe:

Threats to social attachments, especially the dissolution of social bonds, are a primary source of negative affect. People feel anxious at the prospect of losing important relationships, feel depressed or grief stricken when their connections with certain other people are severed, and feel lonely when they lack important relationships.<sup>60</sup>

However, this negative psychological affect doesn't need to be permanent. Rather they contend that "anxiety ensues if people are excluded from social groups, but experiences of social inclusion appear to counteract the effects of exclusion and remove the anxiety."<sup>61</sup> Central Avenue Church, is a faith community that has founded its existence for those who are amidst a faith-transition. This is exemplified in three ways: 1) they offer a new belongingness for those who have been displaced from evangelicalism, 2) they reinforce the reality of 'the end' from which one has left and 3) encourage people to find their new beginning wherever that leads.

### **A Post-Evangelical Belongingness**

Central Avenue Church is certain about one thing: belongingness is never contingent upon one's theological or political beliefs. Central Avenue Church is adamant that there is no uniform metaphysic required for membership or belonging within the community. Inclusion is never contingent upon doctrinal affirmation, religious affiliation, sexual orientation or political inclination. Rather than organizing community life around a bonded-set of theological

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<sup>60</sup> Baumeister and Leary, "The Need to Belong," 506.

<sup>61</sup> Baumeister and Leary, 506.

constructs, the church has organized itself around a commitment to love one another like Christ and love the world through egalitarian social engagement. Belongingness at Central Avenue happens through the voluntary shared life of the community rather than an imposed doctrine upon the community.

This means Central Avenue has a strong emphasis on gathering together and engaging the broader community. Careful attention is given to not impose beliefs or to influence “conversions,” rather to explore the questions relating to how beliefs function in one’s life. This means the active life of Central Avenue looks much different than most churches. There is essentially no energy put into policing the group’s doctrinal purity or theological/philosophical questions. Instead, energy is used to support a transitional home for the financially vulnerable, a mentorship program for foster children, blood drives, community meals, film discussions, developing world water projects, animal rescues and many more practical incarnations of love and justice.

### Embracing the End

Along with the many opportunities to gather and engage at Central Avenue, there is also an explicit encouragement to theological questioning, deconstruction, reconstruction and discussion. Although there is not a predetermined creed or ideology, there is a strong culture of teaching and learning at Central Avenue. The church will regularly use its resources to host influential thinkers like Peter Rollins, John Caputo and Rachel Held Evans. The goal is to expand thinking not confine it to a predetermined end.

With most the congregation being twenty and thirty-somethings who have disassociated from evangelicalism, Central Avenue is consistently demonstrating in its teaching and practice, why one’s spiritual health is connected to intellectual integrity and coherence. Much like Moses

reminded the Israelites that they were no longer in bondage to Egypt, the consistent message of Central Avenue is related to the moral inconsistencies of evangelicalisms exclusionary ecclesiology and coercive views of God.

With a clear bent toward Radical and Pyro Theologies, Central Avenue encourages the existential crisis related to the neutral zone. There is never a promise that “God will fix it” or “everything will be ok.” Rather, there is a consistent demonstrated life together, where no one needs to walk through life’s inevitable difficulties alone.

In many ways, Central Avenue has appropriated a generic evangelical liturgy into its worship life. There is singing, although not evangelical worship songs, a pastoral prayer, reading of Christian scripture, and a dominant focus on teaching, including a question and answer or discussion time following the sermon. In this sense, Central Avenue “feels” like an evangelical church experience, but with a radical post-evangelical message.

#### Where New Beginnings Are Birthed

Central Avenue is a safe and informative space for the post-evangelical neutral zone. However, as has been demonstrated, one will not remain in the neutral zone indefinitely. There will be something new to emerge. Central Avenue recognizes its strength as a space for the exiled in the neutral zone of a faith-transition, but does not insist its essentiality for all ‘new beginnings.’ Many have continued to belong at Central Avenue through the neutral zone and into a new beginning. However, there is a recognition that some new beginnings will lead people beyond Central Avenue and even beyond church or Christianity. This does not possess an existential threat to the community, but is a process the community celebrates and encourages.

Central Avenue is a place where post-evangelicals can begin to find a new consensus and belonging with others who have felt the social and emotional trauma of a faith-transition. It is one example of a helpful post-evangelical community of faith.

## Chapter Seven: Plan B, Ministry and Me

In this section, I will attempt to summarize the impact this project has had on me as a person and a minister. The goal of this project was to provide space of refuge, relationship and reflection for those experiencing a faith transition. This would be done by creating an online community where people could work through the intellectual and emotional realities of their transitioning faith. In seeking to create such a space for others, I discovered a space of deep acceptance and embrace for my own faith. This new personal space can be characterized in three ways: 1) less anxious and antagonistic, 2) greater ecclesiological imagination and 3) a new belongingness.

### Less Anxious and Antagonistic

Evangelicalism formed me in ways for which I am very grateful. It was the tradition that ignited my passion for God, where, as a teenager I discovered God in an intimate and tangible way. Evangelicalism provided a foundational theological lens in which I could better make sense of the world. Similarly, evangelicalism has taught me the immeasurable value of things like justice, social engagement, compassion and relational health. It was through the evangelical tradition that I learned to live aware of community, integrity, sacrifice, and ethics. In fact, it was evangelical scholarship that inspired me to become a life-long learner and ignited my passion for pastoral theology.

However, as I became a leader within evangelicalism, with its narrowly defined beliefs, I also developed an anxiety toward dissension and differences of opinion. Within evangelicalism I learned there is always a correct and accurate theological answer. The truth, I believed, could always be discerned through careful biblical study leading to the “right” answers about God, life and faith. Through evangelicalism I inherited a dualistic worldview where beliefs are divided

between ‘right or wrong’ and ‘good or evil.’ Therefore, when someone disagreed or challenged my position, I had a programmed response of defensive antagonism. Convinced that my own beliefs were “right” and “biblical,” I worked tirelessly to articulate these views in weekly sermons. I always felt pressure to convince people to think like me. There was an unhealthy need within me for the approval and affirmation of others. I wanted to hear that my beliefs were “right.” For if they were not right and good, the only other option was wrong and bad. I wanted my beliefs to be the community’s consensus. Although, I was beginning to reimagine the nature of God beyond the traditional borders of evangelicalism, the dualism of “right” vs. “wrong” and “good” vs. “evil” persisted in my theological posture and approach. This led to a haunting anxiety. I needed the community to affirm what I was teaching. Consequently, I often had an unhealthy antagonism toward those who did not see something as I did.

Evangelicals have often obtained a reputation for being over-certain of their beliefs. For me, this leads to an aggression in trying to convince others of alternative theological ideas. Although my ideas were changing, they evolved entrenched in a posture of over-certainty, and aggression. The Experience, was the first opportunity I have had to resituate myself as a minister with a new belief posture. No longer are my beliefs the defining traits of my spiritual-self, rather, I am discovering that my beliefs will continue to grow and become nuanced. This means, the posture in which I hold my beliefs and *others’* beliefs has profoundly changed/matured. Working through The Experience, I was genuinely excited to hear about differing beliefs; how people arrived at them and what they meant to them. I felt no pressure to change anyone’s mind or convince anyone of my position. Rather, I could engage participants where they were. Seeking to understand what someone believes and why they believe it, is a lot less anxiety-inducing than

trying to convince them of your beliefs so you can feel right. I look forward to new ministry ventures from this open and inquisitive posture.

### Greater Ecclesiological Imagination

I spent fifteen years of full-time pastoral ministry in one church. Even before I was hired as a full-time minister, I worked in that church as an intern and volunteer. It has profoundly influenced my perspective and capacity as a pastor. The Experience however, opened new possibilities for ministry. I could teach freely, respond pastorally from a wider world view, ask people to engage free from judgement and I did it using a medium I had never imagined using for pastoral ministry. The Experience provided me with an opportunity to flex my pastoral muscle in a way that I had never experienced before. This was both inspiring and empowering. First, it was inspiring to be able to walk with a people for the five-week season and be an influence in their search for greater spiritual space. Second, it was empowering, because I could do what I love to do beyond the confines of the congregation. The Experience was an opportunity to test my gifts and abilities beyond the contexts they were formed in.

I am increasingly optimistic that my ministry in the future can continue to transcend traditional ecclesiological structures, and impact people in spaces and ways that I never would have pursued as a congregational minister. Although, I am not certain of what that looks like, I am far more confident that I can be a part of it.

### A New Belongingness

When I began to imagine what the Plan B project could be, I envisioned it to be a project about moving forward after one's evangelical identity, or 'Plan A,' ceases to be an option. The 'B' in Plan B, was intended to be a signifier of sequence. One sets out to live plan 'A,' yet when that is no longer possible, it is plan 'B' that must emerge. However, what occurred through the

planning, research and execution of Plan B, was my own personal sense of ‘belongingness’. In the process of this project, I became acutely aware that it was belongingness itself that I had lost in my faith-transition.

My role as the minister of the church, had been the most defining aspect of my assumed identity. When I left conservative evangelicalism, I left many of the relationships, functions and networks that provided my own sense of belongingness. As I worked through the Plan B project I realized three important things about myself. First, I was deeply hurt in being rejected by the very people I had given so much energy and emotion to, simply because my beliefs had evolved. This left a belongingness-gap within me. The second realization was that I could never go back to leading or belonging to a community set on rigid doctrinal assertions. I could care for the people and honor their place in my story, but my story was leading me beyond evangelicalism. The third thing I discovered was the emerging awareness of a new belongingness. Where my belongingness was previously defined by my role as a minister and my beliefs as an evangelical, I have discovered deep relationship beyond those things. From my marriage, to my role as a dad, to new friendships in California, sustained relationships with Canadian friends, and the relentless love of Christ, I have woken to a greater belongingness.

In this sense, I have come to understand Plan B, as not a project solely about the sequence of cognition that occurs in one theologically. Rather, it has been a project about the experience of ‘belongingness’ one losses and then seeks to find. I have discovered the ‘B’ in Plan B, has everything to do with human ‘b’elongingness. Both mine and fellow faith-transitioners.

## Conclusion

The concept for the Plan B Project emerged from my personal transition beyond evangelicalism. Convinced that my experience was not unique, the goal was to establish a safe space where others experiencing a cognitive dissonance with evangelicalism could find refuge, relationship and what was needed for meaningful reflection. Entering the project, I expected to observe the following four things as outlined in Chapter One:

- 1) Participants instinctively know there is an incongruence between evangelical doctrine and what they experience in world. Naming the places of incongruence will bring a sense of freedom for participants.
- 2) Participants are looking to live a faith expression that has coherence with what they experience in the world. There will be a greater urgency amongst participants to leave their evangelical church if such a coherent faith is articulated. When given theological language and data that affirms their inclinations and contradicts their evangelical tradition, participants will be more likely to move away from evangelical groups.
- 3) The crisis of faith for participants is primarily theological in nature. They are looking for theological formation to ease their theological and cognitive dissonance.
- 4) Participants will discover a new theological consensus.

Having come through the implementation of The Experience, analyzing the data and researching the existential nature of transition, it is the conclusion of this project that the primary concern for participants experiencing a faith transition is not theological in nature. It was anticipated that an articulation of a coherent post-evangelical theology would bring a greater sense of freedom for participants (hypothesis #1). However, what became apparent instead was, that the greater sense of freedom emerged in knowing there were others who could relate to all the relational and emotional complexities surrounding a transitioning faith. The freedom that was

experienced was not primarily intellectual in nature, but surfaced in weeks three and four as participants realized they were amongst like-minded people, who understood the difficulty of questioning or breaking evangelical consensus.

Similarly, this project discovered the second and third hypothesis were also inaccurate/incomplete. It became increasingly obvious that it was not more or better information that participants needed to disassociate from evangelicalism. Rather, it was because of their deep belonging that many felt an urgency not to leave. Participants seemed to appreciate the exercise of articulating coherent theological concepts, however, it was the deep sense of belonging and existential security that kept many from exiting the tradition. The hinge upon which one decides to exit from or remain within evangelicalism, often has more to do with belonging and existential identity than it does theology.

The final hypothesis related to participants finding a new consensus. This did bear itself out in The Experience. Participants could express ideas, frustrations, questions and doubts within the group, in which most evangelical churches could not tolerate. The result was a quick cohesion of group members into a temporary form of (online) community and belongingness. This was by far, the most successful part of The Experience.

In conclusion, the five-week online experience was not a cure-all for difficult and disorienting faith transitions. It did however, provide a greater understanding of the scope and significance a faith-transition can play in one's life and well-being. In tracing both the cognitive and relational aspects of an individual's faith transition, this project has demonstrated that such transitions frequently begin when one recognizes long-held beliefs no longer correspond to their experienced reality. This break in correspondence frequently initiates a questioning of coherence, ultimately requiring one to choose between belonging within evangelical consensus or leaving

the group into an unknown future. If there is a rupture in the relationship with evangelicalism, one is forced into a season defined by a search for a new belongingness and consensus. It is in finding this new belongingness, that one is best able to construct a new coherence from the place of acceptance.

It is evident from the studies done and cited in this project, that there is a significant trend away from evangelical affiliation. For many, this disassociation is necessary and inevitable, while at the same time, it remains an intimidating process. Through increased understanding of the cognitive, emotional and relational impact of faith-transitions, greater pastoral support can be offered to those facing this multi-dimensional transition and new communities of post-evangelical belongingness can emerge.

## **Appendix A: Video Discussions from The Experience**

Invite Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t5PREbenNg>

Week One:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWN\\_P4gonb0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWN_P4gonb0)

Week Two:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ePlNs37xQ8>

Week Three:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLcgFrh5kY0>

Week Four:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anEdhZ47Bvo>

Week Five:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZY742ttV1A>

## Appendix B: Instructions for Participants

In an initial email to participants the following vision for The Experience was communicated:

For many of us who have been around church for a while, our predominate categories for evaluating ideas tend to be ‘true/false’ & ‘right/wrong’. During Plan B, we are going to work hard to emphasize alternative categories, such as ‘helpful’, ‘life-giving’, & ‘justice inspiring’. Consequently, if someone offers an opinion or insight that you disagree with, the point is never to argue their view as false/wrong and yours as true/right. Rather, the goal is to seek to understand other perspectives. Why are they thinking that? How did they get there? How has that approach been helpful or life-giving to them?

**There is no wrong answer in Plan B and there is no theological out-of-bounds.** May we always listen and never seek to “trump” with Bible verses. Two thousand years into this ‘Christianity thing’ and “bible-versing” each other has yet to be enjoyed by anyone (accept those wielding the verse).

The fact is, for some of us, the Bible doesn’t currently inspire us and we are desperately trying to imagine a Christianity that is bigger than what we’ve been told the Bible says. And for others of us, the Bible remains a beloved trusted source of authority and guidance. So, as we step into Plan B, let’s all be the instigators of generosity and compassion.

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